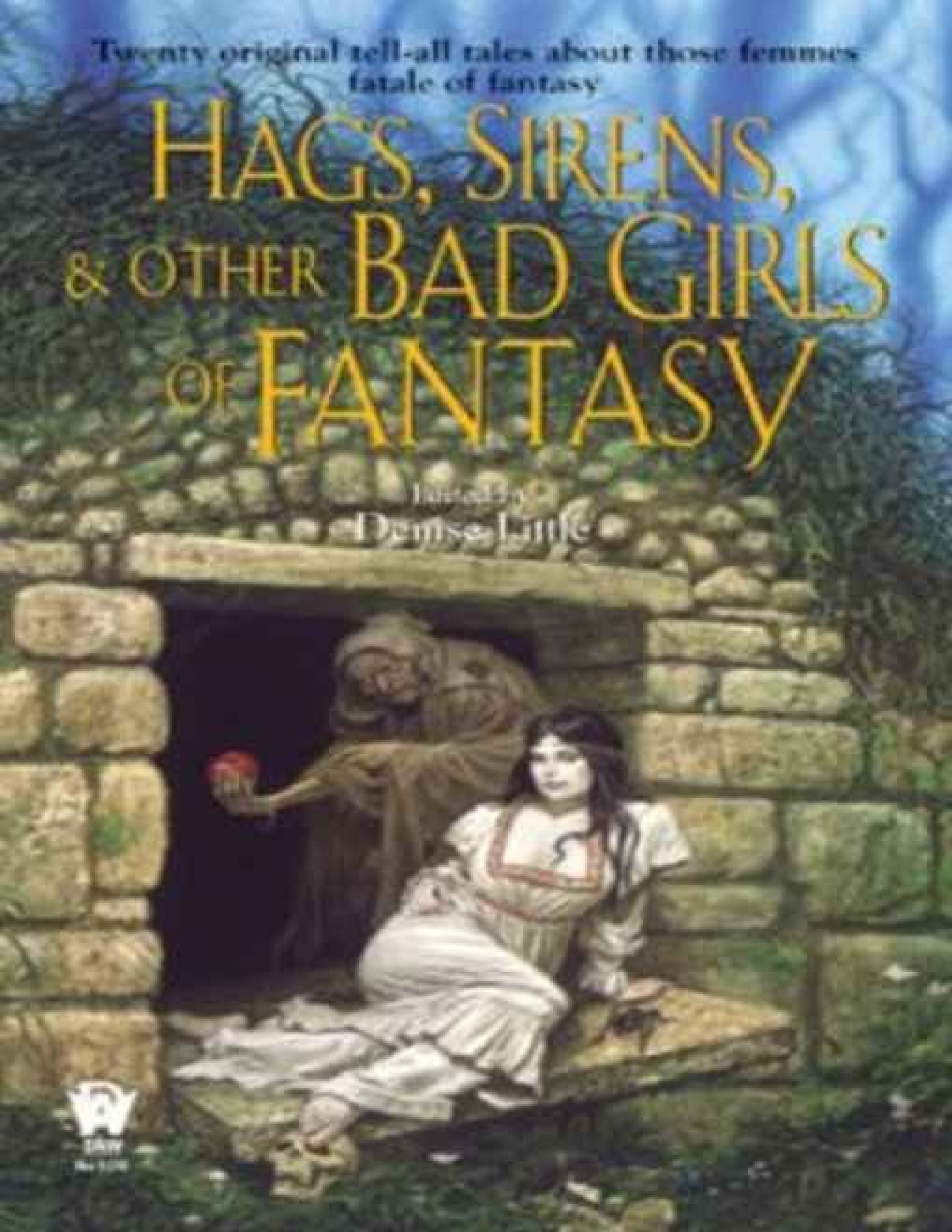
Twenty original tell-all tales about those femmes fatale of fantasy

HAGS, SIRENS, & OTHER BAD GIRLS OF FANTASY

Edited by
Denise Little



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INTRODUCTION

Denise Little

Bad girls have more fun. We all know it. Even if we have no intention of crossing the line to join them, it's easy to see that they're dancing harder, playing harder, laughing harder, and acting out on all those dreadful impulses that the rest of us stifle. Whether they're rock goddesses or starlets or heiresses or corporate executives, they're out there in the limelight, doing what they please, without a care in the world for what the rest of us think—except for an occasional craving for an audience. And that's just in the real world . . . .

It's always seemed to me that the bad girls of faerie, fantasy, and myth have their real world competition beaten, hands down, both for outrageous behavior and for sheer, unmitigated gall.

When I was growing up, my parents didn't much care for their kids to watch the violence playing on television, so they limited my screen time and gave me lots of nice classical literature to read instead. *Hah!* They had no idea they were handing over the keys to a world crammed with violence and filled with amazing female role models.

There were the sirens, singing men to watery graves. There were the sorceresses, who blasted anyone who dared get in their way. There were all the memorable Greeks and Romans, human and immortal, who ignored their parents, occasionally sliced and diced their children, and sometimes even turned men into stone. Hags and harpies, sirens and sorceresses, and the rest of the bad girls of the old tales. I read about them all, and I was fascinated and thrilled.

I knew better than to tell my parents how exciting this stuff was—I was pretty sure my mother would flip out if she knew what was really going on in the books I was reading. But those tales shaped who I became. I didn't, of course, try to emulate their gruesome crimes. But I did try to internalize some of their fearlessness, their refusal to be cowed by society, and their incredible ability to be themselves, no matter who disapproved. The bad girls of myth and fantasy had those gifts in abundance. Since I was growing up in the American South in a time when girls had to wear nice dresses to school unless the temperature dropped below zero (which it *never* did), and the principal still measured our hemlines with a ruler to make sure our skirts were long enough for decency's sake, liberated female role models were in short supply in my life. I loved my bad girl heroines.

The tales marked me to such an extent that I learned to read Latin and classical Greek and eventually added a Classics major to my more practical studies in college. And, over time, I found I wasn't alone. The fascination with those stories was widespread.

In the end, it led to this anthology of original tales featuring a fine assortment of fantastic and fey heroines who have their roots in all the old tales I so loved when I was growing up. In this volume, you'll find everything from the tooth fairy to the sirens, from Cinderella's stepmother to a fine assortment of Greek monsters. Some of the tales are laugh-out-loud funny, more of them are dark delights and spine-chilling stories that walk a bit on the wild side . . .

> . . . As is appropriate for a book about bad girls. I hope that you enjoy the book as much as I did.

SHALL WE DANCE?

C. S. Friedman

C.S. Friedman is the acclaimed author of many fabulous novels, including *The Wilding*, *The Madness Season*, *In Conquest Born*, *Black Sun Rising*, *When True Night Falls*, *Crown of Shadows*, and *This Alien Shore.* She's been nominated for the John W. Campbell Award, and *This Alien Shore* was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

I never talk about *her* except when I'm drinking.

It's the kind of story that needs alcohol to help it along, to wash it down past the logic centers in the brain to the dark places all the way in the back of your head where you don't ask too many questions, you just accept things. That's the only way I can deal with it. Try to pin it down, stick a name on it, pretend it makes sense . . . that just doesn't work without alcohol.

Oh, and my listener has to be drinking, too. Can't tell the story otherwise. I've tried it, it doesn't work. Maybe because no sober person would believe me.

So have another drink, why don't you? And maybe by morning, if you're lucky, you'll forget everything I'm telling you.

Trust me, you'll want to forget.

It began one night that Bill Kemper and I went down to the Styx to pick up some women. I'm not too good at that game, truth be told, and I usually come home empty handed, but Bill's a master of the club scene and damned proud of it. I liked going with him sometimes just to watch him at work . . . and maybe

just a little bit because I hoped if I stayed close enough to him all night, some of his magic might rub off on me.

That magic is why she picked him out of the crowd that night, I'm guessing, and maybe she does that to guys like Bill wherever she finds them. Or maybe she was just bored that night and wanted fresh sport. Like you know how a cat will play with a mouse when it isn't really hungry, just for something to do? Maybe like that.

But if you don't know Bill and what he was like, then you can't really understand what she was all about. So let me start another way. Let me tell you about him.

For starters . . . playing poker with him was scary.

It wasn't that his luck was always good. Some days the cards are good to a man and some days they aren't, but, generally speaking, every man gets his break sooner or later. And it wasn't even that he knew the odds of the game really well. We used to joke about his not being able to keep the order straight, like confusing whether a flush or a straight was worth more than a full house, or forgetting to figure in wild cards when working out the odds of a draw.

But man, when he wanted you to back down . . . you did. Didn't matter what the hell you were holding, be it a royal flush or even five aces . . . he would fix you with that stare of his, and you'd know in your gut, with absolute certainty, that whatever you had in your hand, he was going to beat it. And the next thing you knew, you had put your cards down on the table and were moving your seat back a bit, like you didn't even want to be too close to him. And he'd just smile and collect the pot as if he didn't really know what had happened . . . all of that without words, mind you, or even conscious thought. It was as if some primitive part of your brain, the part that handles basic survival concepts like *Fight for your life!* and *Run away!* was signaling with all its might, *Fold your cards, now!*

Yeah, I know it doesn't make much sense. But I swear it's true.

He was like that at work, too. I remember one day he had made an appointment to talk to the boss about a raise. Old Man Pfifer was notoriously tight-fisted, and the chance of getting more money out of him was generally on a par with asking if you could borrow his Rolls Royce to drive through McDonald's for lunch. We even had a tradition in the office that when people went in to talk to him about their salary or benefits, we'd get up a betting pool on how long it would take them to get thrown out on their ass. I won seventeen bucks once by betting on "less than thirty seconds."

But I didn't bet when Bill went in there. I knew him too well for that.

The floor was so quiet when he was in there you could have heard a pin drop. Pfifer's door is nigh on soundproof, so you can't usually hear what's being said in his office. But sometimes when he yells it's loud enough to carry, or else you'll hear a sharp crack, and you know he banged his fist on the mahogany desk to illustrate a point. Either of those things would have given us a good clue as to what was going on.

But there was nothing. And damn it all if after a few minutes Bill didn't walk out with a broad smile on his face, like a cat that just nabbed itself a fat mouse. He never did tell me how much of a raise he'd gotten, but I knew it was at least what he'd gone in asking for. The guy was scary.

So now let me tell you about that night at the club.

It was a Friday night, pretty late as I recall, and the dance floor of Styx was filled to overflowing. Bill and I were nursing drinks at the rail of the wraparound balcony and evaluating the mating rituals playing out beneath us. He had gotten into this Discovery Channel Narrator mode and was commenting on how the young male predators were circling the pack, waiting for an available female to pounce upon, when suddenly he stiffened and I heard him say, "Holy shit!" and

the drink nearly dropped out of his hand.

I followed his gaze down to the dance floor, to a far corner where the crowd wasn't quite as compacted, and after a moment I saw what he was looking at. I saw *her*.

Holy shit! was right.

She was hot. Hot on levels you didn't even know women could be hot on until you saw her. Just looking at her made you want to leap over the balcony and pull off some insanely macho stunt in the hopes of getting her attention. Bill could have pulled it off, of course. Not me. My trying to score with a woman like that would have the same effect as an orangutan trying to impress Marilyn Monroe.

You see now why I have to be drunk to tell this story, don't you? Just remembering her makes me hope she'll walk in the door right now, so that I can have my chance at her—and that's not a good thing to want, trust me.

What did she look like? Ah, that's a tough one. What *I* saw was a sultry Greek beauty with wide dusky eyes and long black hair and a body to die for. But then I'm Greek, you see, and always prefer women from the home team. Bill would later tell me that she was really a redhead, and it must have been a trick of the lighting that made her seem otherwise . . . . I suppose I don't have to tell you he was really hot for redheads, do I? Do I need to bring out another ten witnesses to demonstrate that each man saw in her what he wanted most in a woman? It was like she was some kind of magical mirror that gathered up the energy from a man's gonads and reflected it right back at him, perfected.

Oh, she's looked like other things in the past. Some pretty damned weird things, at times. But that night, in that place, that was the look she had chosen.

So we stared at her for a minute or so, and next thing I knew, Bill was heading

for the stairs with a look in his eye that I knew all too well. I'm not even sure it was the woman he wanted so badly, in that moment, or if it was the challenge of winning her. I glanced back over the rail to see what the competition looked like and saw her doing some slow, sultry dance with a guy who looked like a model for Bowflex. Black silk tank top that bared muscular arms, bronze skin with a black tattoo of thorns around his bicep, the whole nine yards. And he was gorgeous, of course. That goes without saying. Women like that have a magical aura that keeps plain guys from getting within ten feet of them. (Trust me on this, I have personal experience.) Her partner kept glancing around the dance floor with a scowl that made it clear no other man should come near her if he valued his life, which had cleared out a nice circle around them. Ironically, it made it easier to watch her, which was well worth doing.

So I leaned on the rail and called for another beer and settled in to enjoy the show.

Bill is nothing if not a seasoned hunter. You could see as he wended his way between the dancing couples that his attention was wholly fixed on her, drinking in every bit of information that he could get before choosing the moment to strike. For a brief moment I had a fantasy of him catching the scent of Bowflex's piss on the floor, where the bodybuilder had marked his turf, and blithely ignoring it. He was that kind of guy.

Finally he entered the circle of the forbidden. Bowflex pretended not to notice him, but you could see the guy's shoulders tense up in anticipation. The woman . . . ah, that was another story. The dark eyes fixed on Bill, and even from where I stood, you could feel the power of that sultry gaze. Even from where I watched, you could drink in the scent of her, warm as desire, sweeter than any earthly perfume could possibly be.

What's that, you say? I told you earlier that she had picked Bill out, not the other way around? So she did, my friend, though at the time we didn't know it. Bowflex was simply bait, set out by someone who knew what manner of man she was seeking. I can see that all now, though it takes a few stiff drinks for me to be able to appreciate it.

So Bill stepped in and the circling began. Bowflex puffed himself up like a lizard in rut and I could swear he actually hissed at Bill. Bill just transfixed him with that same hard, uncompromising stare that won him so much money at the poker table. Once or twice they got close enough that they almost touched, and you could see Bowflex's arms twitch from how much he wanted to punch Bill in the face and end the standoff. You could smell the testosterone in the air as they both fought their natural male instincts to beat each other to bloody pulps until only the victor was left standing. Meanwhile, *she* just smiled, an expression that was, in retrospect, kind of chilling.

Finally, with a growl, Bowflex quit the contest and stalked off huffing into the crowd. I found I had been holding my breath, and I released it at last. Bill claimed his spoils with a graceful flourish and spent the next dance using his poker glare to drive back any man who so much as looked at his prize. After a few numbers I lost sight of them, and by the end of an hour I concluded that Bill had decided to move his victory dance to some more private venue. Hardly a surprise. I stuck around a while longer, made one failed effort to connect with a dark-skinned Asian goddess in a beaded mini-dress, and drove home alone. Yeah, I take my own car to these things. With Bill for a friend you gotta do that sometimes.

I dreamed about the woman that night. Woke up remembering something about snakes. Not a good sign.

* * *

Bill showed up about noon at my house, which kind of surprised me. Usually I hear about his conquests Monday morning over the water cooler. I had my kid with me at the time (yeah, I was married once; that's another story I have to be drunk to talk about), so it was hard for him to communicate anything more than that the inevitable had happened and he'd had a great night. The rest was just going to have to wait for a more private moment.

I'd promised Andrew we could go to the zoo that day, and Bill invited himself

along. He kept the kid entertained all the way there with tales of foot-long millipedes, drooling toads, and even some town in Washington where (he claimed) they held a slug barbecue once a year. That was fine by me. With any luck Andrew would repeat the stories later to his mother, who had a pathological hatred for all things slimy and creepy. I liked to think of it as interest on her alimony.

The zoo had a new wolf habitat, which was what Andrew wanted to see. It was one of those ultramodern ones, where they try to recreate the environment the animals come from, exactly. With all those hills and trees and boulders, it took you a while to figure out where the wolves were. There were six of them that we could eventually make out, big husky males, and the zoo guide who was there told us that one was a new arrival that was jockeying for position among them. You could see him at the edge of the group, circling around in the shadows cast by the artificial boulders, eyeing his rivals. Bill started giving Andrew a blow-by-blow description of what the wolf was thinking, which had to do with his wanting a girlfriend but knowing that no lady wolf would go out with him if he wasn't tough enough to stand up to bullies. So Bill said he had to pick fights to show off, and the ladies would favor whichever wolf won.

Almost as if he heard Bill talking, the young wolf started moving in on one of the older ones. His target whipped around quickly to face him head on. I thought for a minute they were going to lunge at each other, but they didn't. Ears laid flat back against their heads, fur bristling, they just snarled and growled and *almost* attacked, again and again, until finally the young one lost his nerve and ran off into the brush, his tail between his legs. Kinda like Bowflex the night before.

"That's how animals do it," Bill told my boy. "They don't actually need to fight each other, you see, just figure out which one is meaner. The weaker one gives up then, rather than fight, so that nobody gets hurt. Those are the rules."

"Humans don't play by those rules," I pointed out.

Bill winked. "The smart ones do."

Then my boy went into the House of Bugs to see the giant cockroaches (I bought him a disposable camera so he could take pictures to bring home to his mom), and I finally got the lowdown on the night before . . . and on *her*.

I expected to hear that there was passion aplenty, the earth shook, the heavens trembled, and she would never forget the night for as long as she lived. Nothing new, really. After a while you get used to the routine, and like I said—Monday morning water cooler stuff. And yet . . . as the smell of fresh elephant dung wafted over to where we were standing . . . I had to admit that this time he sounded different. More affected by the experience, it seemed. Yeah, he's bragged to me a hundred times before of his conquests, but usually he tells me of the things *he* did: moves he made, seductions scored, bedroom athletics mastered. This time he spoke only of her. How beautiful she was. How much she turned him on. My God, had the mystery woman managed to touch some part of Bill's soul that normally was as solidly armored as Fort Knox? Had she left the great seducer with an emotional imprint that was going to last longer than a single night? If so, it was a first.

A zoo guide came by then to point out that Bill had been leaning against the bars of an enclosure, which he assured us was strictly forbidden by a number of highly visible signs. The guide glared at us both until we'd obediently moved a few feet away. Normal stuff for a day at the zoo . . . for most people. I don't think it even hit me till later how *not* normal it was for Bill. I certainly didn't make any connection between that and the "red headed goddess" whose virtues he was still extolling.

Oh, yeah. That's when I found out he thought she was a redhead. I would have argued with him about it, but my boy came out of the House of Bugs just at that moment and demanded to be taken to the gift shop, where he'd been told there were jelly candies in the shape of African millipedes. Sure, I told him, only don't eat them all now. Save some of them to share with your mom when you get home.

He promised me he would.

I dreamed about the woman that weekend. Bad dreams. You know how sometimes you dream about sexy women and wake up with a hard-on? I woke up from my dreams of *her* with my private parts shriveled up cold and small against me, like they had caught wind of something so fearsome and terrible that they wanted to crawl up inside me and hide.

Should have been some kind of warning, I guess.

I found out later that Bill had seen her again on Sunday night. Turns out he'd spent the better part of the weekend at the club waiting for her to show up again. Apparently their first night of wild intimacy had not included an exchange of phone numbers. Normally Bill is pretty blasé about stuff like that, but this time . . . well, *obsessed* is the only word that I could really apply.

He even talked about how he was maybe falling in love with her. That really spooked me. Bill isn't the kind to mistake physical infatuation for love, and he's made fun of quite a few men that forgot the distinction. But something about *her* had gotten under his skin, enough that he was starting to forget about his usual modus operandi and just obsess over how they could be together. For him, I guess that felt like love. For me . . . it was just one more bit of weirdness that made my blood run cold.

I tried to talk some sense into him. He got all angry and walked off in a huff and didn't talk to me for the rest of the week. Said I was just jealous that I couldn't get a woman like *that* in a million years. I found out later he was spending every night at Styx, maybe hoping she'd show up on a week-night, maybe just wanting to lick up her sweat from the dance floor or something. He was starting to look haggard and drawn at work, but that's no real surprise when you figure how little sleep he was getting. He was starting to snap at people too, and . . . they snapped back. Now *that* was a surprise. Whatever it was about Bill that inspired other people to just get out of his way, it seemed to be on a vacation

that week.

Thursday he missed poker night. Friday I figured he was going to Styx again, but I didn't feel like going with him. I asked someone else from the office to join me, an analyst named Kevin. I was hoping *she* would show up, and I wanted someone else to get a good look at her. Someone to tell me if I was crazy or not. Kevin was a pretty level-headed guy, and if she just looked normal to him . . . well, then I would know I needed to see a shrink.

I didn't go to my usual spot—I didn't want Bill to see me there if he came—but Kevin and I took up residence in some friendly shadows along the far rail, beers in hand, to watch the show.

We didn't have long to wait. Bill actually made his entrance by her side, which I guess was a good sign as far as he was concerned. His walk across the dance floor with her was like the prowling of a wolf, and I could swear I could hear him snarling at his would-be rivals as he drove them back from *his* space and *his* woman. Not as effectively as before, I noted. Maybe it was my imagination, but the open space surrounding them seemed smaller than the week before, and the predators were circling closer, clearly ready to make their move.

A week ago I would never have doubted that Bill could hold on to a woman against all comers. Now . . . I wasn't so sure.

At that point Kevin said "Holy crap!" and I figured he'd just seen her for the first time. I glanced over and saw him stiff with attention. Kind of like his whole body had gotten an erection. I wondered if I'd looked like that the first time I'd seen her. It embarrassed me to see another man like that, as if I'd trespassed on some private sexual moment.

"Is that her?" he asked, and when I nodded, added another "Holy crap." Then he watched for a while more and finally said to me (without taking his eyes off her), "You didn't tell me she was black."

Kevin had a thing for leggy African beauties, as far removed from the images that Bill and I had seen in *her* as could be. That's another reason why I'd picked him to come with me.

"Describe her to me," I said to him.

"For what? You've got eyes."

"Just do it. I'll explain later."

So he did. And, yeah, my Greek nymph turned out to be an African tribal princess in his eyes. Complete with ethnic jewelry and a tight little halter beaded in Masai patterns and that kind of true black skin that (he assured me) you can almost never find in America. So he did answer my question, though it wasn't the answer I'd hoped for. That *thing* down on the dance floor—and at this point I was not all that sure it was a woman—appeared to each of us in the form we desired most, the form we hungered after in our dreams . . . and since her mere presence in the room turned all men into vicious competitors, none of us would ever discuss the trick with each other enough to catch on.

Only now I had. And the truth made my blood run cold in my veins.

What are you, I thought at her, *that every man sees in you the thing he wants most? That men are willing to fight over you like animals, without ever seeing your true face?*

I wondered what I could do to get Bill's attention away from her. Maybe if I did that, he'd have a moment of sobriety, and he'd see her for what she was and have the brains to flee. But the whole of his attention was fixated on the dance floor and on the pack of rivals that were circling him and the woman like hungry wolves, just waiting for the first sign in weakness in him before they darted in

and stole his prize. Nothing I could do would change that.

And the look on her face . . . ah, talk about chilling your blood. Easy indeed to picture her like an African princess now, watching from the height of some hand-carved ivory throne while buff, half-naked warriors beat each other to bloody bits in her name. But merely watching was not enough for this one, oh, no. Every now and then she would favor one man or another with a look, a touch, a wordless promise that would drive them to new heights of madness—and Bill to new depths of desperation. All of this was very cold and deliberate, as if the scene were not even a source of pleasure for her so much as . . . as an art form.

Bill was still in possession of the field when I left, but he was hanging onto it by his fingernails, and I couldn't bring myself to get close to him for any reason because that meant getting closer to *her*. So I left without speaking to him or even letting him know I was there. Kevin remained behind to stare at her, lost in some private fantasy, and finally I settled for warning him to keep his distance from her at any cost.

Then I left.

I'm pretty sure he didn't hear a word I said.

Monday morning Bill had an argument with someone at work. It wouldn't have been noteworthy for anyone else, but for him it was so uncharacteristic that I couldn't help but see it as yet another part of his overall decline.

I don't even know what started the trouble exactly, but by the time I heard about it voices had been raised high enough and long enough for work to stop in all the offices nearby, so that people could listen in. Bill yelled something about a report he was responsible for that was going to be late for reasons he would not accept. Apparently he was talking to one of his subordinates, who had decided to

take issue with his tone. I won't tell you what that guy yelled back, save that it tended towards four-letter words and phrases you don't normally bring to the office. Very heated, very out-of-control, and totally uncharacteristic for either of them.

No one argued with Bill like that. Not ever. You might start out *intending* to argue with him, you might feel that your cause was so overwhelmingly just that you *had* to argue with him, but as soon as you started you would get this feeling in the pit of your gut that no matter what you said, no matter how you said it, he was going to win, so what was the point? Certainly subordinates never argued with him, no matter how pissed off they were. And no one ever handed him work a day late or in less than pristine condition, not if they didn't want to be seen walking back from a meeting with him with their tail between their legs. Yet apparently that's what had happened.

When it was over Bill walked out onto the main floor with his face still red from fury and a thin line of sweat across his brow. He looked so unlike his normal self that people forgot to scurry out of his way and pretend they'd been working; they just stayed where they were and stared at him like he was some weird new exhibit at the zoo. He glared back at them in warning, but the expression had no real power, and when he had passed safely by a few workers even snickered—snickered!—and muttered jokes about some woman having him by the balls.

So I wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

The office drama settled down to a simmer then, but you could still feel its heat just under the surface, ready to boil over. We were so used to Bill being in control of everything that we honestly didn't know how to deal with this new kind of tension, so we just kinda sat back nervously and waited to see what would come next. I'm sure some guys were hoping for another confrontation—conflict is the best entertainment there is, if you're not in the middle of it—but I was watching Bill for more subtle signs of trouble: a turned head here, lowered eyes there, the shifting of two bodies as they passed in a narrow aisle. Yes, in a thousand subtle ways, the men that Bill worked with were telling him they no

longer respected his dominion over them. You could see that he knew it, too, and didn't know what the hell to do about it. Just as his dominance over other men had always been instinctive, unconscious, so did its slow disappearance defy his understanding or control.

By midweek, when Pfifer called him into his office, you could see the strain of the change in his bloodshot eyes. Their meeting lasted only a few minutes, and though you couldn't hear anything they were saying, you could just taste the bad vibes coming out of that office. When Bill finally came out he looked tired and whipped, and maybe even a little bit bewildered. Like the laws of the universe he had lived by all his life had suddenly been changed, and everyone but him had been given a new program guide. Normally he would have bluffed his way through all that and come out on top anyway, but that day he just looked too exhausted to try.

The guys muttered stuff about lack of sleep and erotic obsessions and snickered about him in disparaging tones when he wasn't listening. But Bill's problem went way beyond those things, I sensed. And at this point I wasn't sure that just getting more sleep or paying more attention to work was going to help him.

Thursday Bill showed up again for poker night.

Only it wasn't really Bill any more.

Whatever that strange gift was which had once allowed him to bend other players to his will, it was completely gone now. I can't tell you how times he lost money that night, when the old Bill could have triumphed by sheer force of confidence. That didn't work any longer. Now, when he had nothing in his hand, you could sense that he had nothing. But when he had a good hand and wanted you to *think* he had nothing so that you would raise the pot, you didn't fall for it. His expression hadn't changed, nor his strategy, nor anything a man might measure and put a name on. But something was gone from him, all the same.

The other guys realized it, too. Kevin even asked Bill if he felt all right, which is as close as these guys normally get to expressing concern about each other. Bill said that he was fine, which we all understood to mean we shouldn't ask him any more questions. But he knew what was happening, you could tell that from his eyes. Sometimes when I caught a glimpse out of him out of the corner of my own, it was like I'd seen a trapped animal, cornered in some terrible place and not knowing where to run. Sometimes . . . sometimes there was just emptiness. A terrible vacuum, where once there had been the most vital male personality I'd ever known.

When Bill got up to fetch more snacks from the kitchen, I followed. As soon as we were out of hearing, I put a hand on his shoulder and said quietly, "She's not good for you. You gotta trust me on this, Bill. You have to break it off."

"You're just jealous," he snapped. But he wouldn't meet my eyes. It was like he was afraid of confrontation. Like he was afraid he wasn't capable of staring another man down.

He wasn't any more, that was the problem. The magical spark in him was gone, and for the first time since that night at Styx I had a feeling I knew what had happened to it.

Cold, cold knowledge. It made me sick inside.

Bill left the kitchen without another word and spent the rest of the night making sure he didn't get caught alone with me again. He avoided meeting my eyes, too, looking away from me or down at his cards every time I turned in his direction. It reminded me more than anything else of a fearful schoolboy trying not to attract the attention of bullies. Or maybe he just was afraid that if he looked too closely, he would see something in my expression he couldn't handle.

Men like that don’t handle pity well.

The next night Bill came to Styx, right on schedule. *She* arrived with him, and they even shared a couple of dances; perhaps in some twisted way she meant that as a parting courtesy. But it was clear to anyone who watched that they wouldn’t be staying together. He no longer had what it took to hold on to a woman like that, and as soon as they entered the club, other men, sensing his newfound vulnerability, began to close in on them.

Soon he was challenged by a goth bruiser in black leather and chains, and it wasn’t much of a contest. Bill’s poker glare was long since gone, and so was the self-confidence that came with it. The goth took his place with the woman while others began to circle them in turn, taking the newcomer’s measure, waiting for the right moment to oust him, and Bill got lost somewhere in the crowd. I didn’t go after him. I didn’t think he’d want to know that I saw him like that.

And *she* . . . she drew the men to her like a spider draws prey, she held them in her arms and whispered torrid promises in their ears, she set their masculine blood aflame and then turned them against one another, and you could see her eyes gleam as men challenged men in her name. Each one was just bait for the next, of course, until finally a man would come along who could hold his place by her side, and that one she would claim for her own, that one she would seduce and nurture and pleasure and destroy, until at last he was delivered back to the dance floor an empty husk, of no more interest to her than the rind of an orange is of interest when all the juice has been sucked out of it.

The movies have it all wrong, you know? It’s not about a headdress full of snakes or bird claws instead of feet or even extra rows of teeth in places where no teeth ought to be . . . though maybe she looked like that in ages past, when it suited her purpose. I’m guessing she can look like anything she wants, anything that draws the right kind of men to her. These days beauty works best.

I stopped by the zoo yesterday. The wolves had let the new arrival join the pack proper, but only at the rock bottom of the pecking order. I saw him in the

shadows gazing wistfully at the she-wolves, but every time he moved in that direction, one of the dominant wolves growled a warning at him and he slunk away, tail between his legs. Funny how that works.

Her name? No, I didn't tell you that, did I? Which name do you want? The one they called her when she swore her vengeance upon all the sons of Adam, seducing men in their sleep so she could steal their seed? The one they gave her back when she robbed sailors of their humanity, transforming them into helpless beasts? Or the one she was called when it was believed that a single glance from her could turn a man to stone? Or maybe you'd recognize the name that Freud gave her centuries after that, when he recognized her as the shadowy figure behind every man's worst nightmares?

Names change over time. But the game never does. *She* never does.

Here, your glass is empty. Let me pour you another beer.

You'll thank me later.

BITTER FRUIT: A TALE OF CROWNLAND

Rosemary Edghill

Rosemary Edghill's first professional sales were to the black & white comics of the late 1970s, so she can truthfully state on her resume that she once killed vampires for a living. She is also the author of over thirty novels and several dozen short stories in genres ranging from Regency Romance to Space Opera, making all local stops in between. She has collaborated with authors such as the late Marion Zimmer Bradley and the late SF Grand Master Andre Norton, worked as an SF editor for a major New York publisher, as a freelance book designer, and as a professional book reviewer. Her hobbies include sleep, research for forthcoming projects, and her Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. Her website can be found at *http://www.sff.net/ people/eluki*

" elp me, Lawgiver, please!" The man nearly wrung his hands in his agitation. Gramercy Lawgiver, presiding judge for the Ninth Northern Circuit Court of Alarra, could not help but be impressed. One so rarely saw an instinct for the theatrical in groundlings.

She had been in the town of Baicy for three days and had spent most of that time perched on a stool behind a lectern in the great hall of the local reeve, holding the Truncheon of Law in the hand that was not propping up her chin and rendering judgment based upon precedent, process, and the desires of the Crown. She expected to be here seven days more: recording births, deaths, and marriages, noting new patents and tax deferments, and rendering the Crown's Justice to the exceedingly litigious residents of Baicy.

If Gramercy Lawgiver had heard one decades-old quarrel involving stolen pigs in the last three days, she had heard twenty—and, further, she had heard the same ones when she was in Baicy seven years ago and would hear them when she returned seven years hence.

But this was something new. She looked down from the lectern of her provisional courtroom at the farmer whose arrival had presented such a welcome interruption from pigs.

"What is your name, Goodman?"

The question seemed to throw him off-balance. There was a moment's hesitation before he answered.

"Mattkin, Lawgiver. These here know me—have a smith-forge on the last steading between Twisted Rock and Lostwoods . . . ." He stared down at his hands helplessly and watched them twist the leather apron he wore.

"And your business with the Crown of Alarra, Mattkin Smith?" Gramercy prompted patiently.

"Wife has been thieved, Lawgiver—give me Crown's justice!"

* * *

It was true that chattel property was counted as real property under the crown law of Alarra, and it was therefore true that a man's wife, unmarried daughters and minor sons could be stolen from him just as his pigs and turnips could. But the difficulty in presenting such a claim, exclusive of the crimes of slavery or murder, gave the cry for this particular justice an antique sound in Gramercy's court.

"Who will witness the existence of Mattkin Smith's wife?" she said, beginning the formal questioning of the petition.

"Here! Here! What call's Mattkin got to come bursting in here like this for?"

I’m to be heard next—me and my Maddie what’s belly-big, and who’s going to pay for that, eh?” A rawboned woman wrapped in scarlet shawls dragged forward a pouting, flash-pretty girl.

The father of the boy accused in that case boiled to his feet. “If you think you’ll see one copper penny, you—”

“Peace!” Gramercy bellowed, setting up a thunderous racket with the Truncheon of Law. It boomed off the hollow lectern, and the sound of it echoed through the hall.

“Now,” she said, when the silence was absolute, “I will hear the rest of Mattkin Smith’s charge before deciding if the case is worthy to be heard by the Crown. If it is, then it will be heard in due course and in its proper place. Now, someone must witness the existence of his wife, and—do you know the name of the man who stole her, Goodman?”

Her words fell into a silence even more profound. She looked around the room, puzzled.

The crowd come to hear justice shook itself like an enormous beast awakening. Several of the people drew close around Mattkin Smith, whispering to him while he shook his head like a fly-deviled bull. The woman who had spoken before came forward, placing herself directly before the lectern. She made sure she had Gramercy’s eyes before she spoke.

“He had no wife, Lawgiver. Never.”

The Lawgivers sent by the Crown gave justice, as was the custom, from sun-up to sun-down. After that, their time was their own—or, more politically, it was given over to the admiration of the laborious entertainments mounted by the local gentry.

Baicy's demands of Gramercy in this area were mercifully light. The town had an old reeve with a young wife; the girl was appallingly timid, and the old man saw the presence of the Crown's Justice as an excuse for heavy, elaborate meals that he would later use to attempt to justify an exemption from his taxes. But once the cloth was lifted from the table, Gramercy was free in fact as well as theory to do just as she liked.

The midsummer moon hung heavy over the reeve's garden, where she lingered, reluctant to seek her bed. The day's mystery was a better companion than the inhabitants of the house. Mattkin Smith had been neither sick nor drunk when he claimed his wife was stolen. So why had the town lied?

And why had Mattkin *let* them lie? She pondered that while listening to the stealthy footsteps approach.

"Lawgiver . . . Lawgiver, please!"

She recognized the voice well enough for it to make her turn into the shadows of the reeve's garden.

"Mattkin Smith? Come into the light."

"Nay. Reeve told me to keep away from you. If he sees me with you, they'll shun me sure."

In an isolated village like Baicy shunning was the sentence of death. No one would buy from Mattkin, no one would sell to him. He might starve or lose his forge for default on taxes no one would let him pay. Gramercy stepped closer.

“Why didn’t you tell the truth when you had the chance? What do you want of me?”

“Justice,” Mattkin said doggedly. “What’s mine was thieved—taken—stolen away. That’s not right, is it? Alarra protects us, doesn’t it? Well, Lawgiver, protect me.”

“From what? Why won’t the others support your story? Who stole your wife?” She wondered in exasperation if some elaborate agrarian joke was being played on her, but to mock the Crown’s Justice was a high crime, and nothing else she had seen had suggested the inhabitants of Baicy were less than loyal.

“The flocks grow fat—no one wants the Crown coming here to spoil that. But my Heldy was stolen off to ride tree, and—”

“Lawgiver Gramercy!” The call for her attention rode over the last words, so she wasn’t sure she’d heard them correctly. Gramercy looked toward the sound and saw the reeve’s steward standing at the garden gate with a lantern held high. She waved, and when she turned back, Mattkin was gone.

She didn’t see the smith again, and finally all the cases were heard and the information recorded, and there was nothing for her to do but head onward to the next village. Her white mule—its blue-and-gold saddlecloth a gaudy warning that the Crown’s Justice rode here and must not be molested—ambled down its accustomed track.

The garrison at the market town of Rayne was only a few miles out of her way. She could plausibly stop there to make certain that a King’s Courier could take her judgments at Baicy back to Alarra. The oiled scroll wound tightly on its spindle inside her truncheon was still more than half empty, but there was certainly no penalty for sending it back now instead of at Kemmerton. And while she was in Rayne, she could take what she had heard in Baicy to the garrison commander as well.

But what could she tell him? Jumbled ravings from a man who might be terrified—or might simply be mad. “The flocks grow fat”—because Heldy Mattkinwife had been stolen to . . . ride a tree?

Were the Baicians sacrificing to the old woods’ gods?

As far as Gramercy cared, that was their business until a complaint of murder was lodged. There were so many gods in the world, after all—each reigned for a while and then vanished, though the Crownpriests’ Temple at Alarra might think differently.

All but one.

The scrap-memory plagued her, and she shook her head to clear it. Had she sucked up some god with her mother’s milk, to think that one was different from all the rest? No matter. Villages held their mysteries; if Baicy’s mystery was heresy, it was not the concern of one lone circuit court judge.

But he asked you for justice . . .

She sighed and swore and reigned her mule in. One more day’s detour wouldn’t make any difference. If she talked privately to Mattkin, she could either put the matter from her mind forever—or have more than the scraps of a local squabble to offer to the garrison commander at Rayne.

Gramercy turned the mule’s head back the way she came, heading for the forge between Twisted Rock and Lostwoods.

Lostwoods. The name had more truth than poetry to it. The road had dwindled to a path, then a track, then the hint of a track, and now her mule was browsing along the banks of a dry streambed, and Gramercy had no idea at all of where she was. She had been headed downhill most of the morning, and Baicy lay along the top of a ridge . . .

She swore and yanked her mule's head away from his meal and turned him up the slope. She would return to Baicy and start again.

But that hope proved bootless too. There was no road, nor hint of a road, and Baicy might as well be on the moon for all the likelihood she had of finding it again.

Her benevolent impulse had evaporated. She would stop to eat and then set her mule on a north-easterly course and hope to strike Rayne, or the Kemmerling, or at least the High Road. She would lay information about Baicy and its trees with the next magistrate or commander that she passed, and when she returned to Baicy in seven years she might hear the end of the story.

She found a flat rock shaded by the green canopy of an ancient dancing oak. She tied her mule to one of its branches and sat and ate her way steadily through day-old bread and new cheese and flat sour wine. The new lady of Baicy had some distance to go in learning how to provision travelers. On the other hand, after two weeks of pigeons' brains in pastry the simpler fare was refreshing. And there would be no adjustment of the reeve's taxes. Gluttony was not a Crown-mandated expense.

She had no fear of bandits, though her armaments consisted entirely of a hoofpick, an eating knife, and the mostly ceremonial truncheon. Both tabard and saddlecloth proclaimed her status, and the reprisals of the Crown against the man or woman who offered harm to Crown's Justice were savage and thorough. Besides, she carried nothing at all worth stealing. While meting Crown's Justice, Lawgivers were forbidden to touch or transport things of value. The chits she

signed for bed and board and clothing were as good as gold anywhere in the Empire. Alarrine rule was the rule of law, and Gramercy loved the law far better than she loved the things she had surrendered for its sake.

Her meal was brief, but the rock was warm; she was scolding herself vigorously for the temptation to linger when a vagrant breeze whipped across her face and the day lost all its beauty.

The smell.

It was . . . not describable. It terrified her without the explanation of memory: she was on her feet, sick and sweating and trying to discover its direction without knowing why.

“Who . . . ? Is someone there?” The sound of her own voice was frightening: sick and weak and pleading. The wind shifted and the smell diminished, but it was on her skin and in her nose and she could not banish it.

She slid down off the rock. Last year’s leaves crinkled beneath her feet. Behind her the mule browsed, unimpressed.

“You damnable thing. Is your nose dead?” She could feel the odor beating against her, plangent as music. To flee was unthinkable; her only hope of peace lay in tracing the wellspring of this great and terrible harm. At length she chose a direction and began to walk, shambling on legs that had forgotten how to bend.

To be *doing* was soothing. Reason returned, and with it, rationalization. The smell was only the smell of a still, of a dye-vat, a rotting orchard, a mass grave. She would satisfy her curiosity if the source wasn’t too far, and after that or instead of that, if it took too long, she would get on her mule and ride away.

She would.

The ground rose, then dipped sharply. When she started down the lea, the smell rose up again—rank and thick like a curtain she had to push through to move. The terror didn’t matter any more. The greater terror was not knowing why she was afraid.

Then she saw the trees.

They were thick-bodied and short, with trunks so pale she was sure they had been painted against deer and moth until she saw that the slenderest of their twisted branches was the same flesh-pale color. The grass beneath them was short. Their ranks were orderly. The juicy think-skinned purple globes crowding every branch seemed to invite, and the scent she had followed, honey-salt and nauseous, rose from them in waves.

She plucked one of the fruits. It came easily into her hand and filled it, luscious and sensual and heavy. The oily sheen of its surface made her hand glisten, and now the smell was inviting. Appetizing. She opened her mouth to bite, but perhaps the buried memory that had terrified her came clearer, and she squeezed instead.

Blood oozed over her fingers, drooling from the soft pulp of the hellborn fruit. Its sweet copper scent was the smell of battlefields.

After that she knew what she would find, but she looked anyway. She was no longer frightened. She threw away the ruined fruit, and with a small soft laugh wiped her scarlet fingers on the front of her blue tabard.

One of the trees had been struck by lightning. Its branches were gone to dust, and it stood in the charred circle of its own burning. The heartwood exposed was already turning gray, and against that split grayness the small bones of the human skeleton trapped within glowed warm white.

Gramercy turned and walked deeper into the grove.

The strong young trees at the edge gave way to older growth. Here the fruit was not as abundant. The trees looked withered, somehow, and many of them were dead. But she knew what she was looking for, and finally she found it.

It was a young tree and had only leaves upon its branches. Its trunk was white and soft and warm, and the opening in it gaped yearningly in anticipation of the treasure soon to be placed within.

“You! What do you want here? Get away!”

The voice was shrill with fear, and Gramercy turned toward it.

Heldy Mattkinwife was blond and tall like most of the northern folk. She towered over Gramercy, and she held a leather bucket full of water braced against one hip as if it were a child.

“Crown’s Justice goes where it wills,” Gramercy pointed out automatically.

“Lawgiver.” Heldy’s eyes widened as she recognized the symbols on the blood-smeared tunic. Her shoulders slumped tiredly and she set down the bucket.

“Where is the Serpent?” Gramercy asked.

Heldy slid down the side of the young tree to rest against it. The energy of fear had evaporated; she wrapped her arms around herself, crooning tonelessly. There were red smears on her mouth and her hands, and the salt musk sweetness of bloodfruit hung over her.

Drugged. Drugged to marry with the Serpent, to enter one of the bridetrees and join her life to its life, so that the tree became a strange, dreaming, half-animal thing that would in its season bear the bloodfruit that was the Serpent's only food.

"Come on." Gramercy went over to her and jerked Heldy roughly to her feet. The woman's eyes were dilated, with only a thin rim of blue showing. Heldy swayed but did nor resist, until Gramercy had led her to the edge of the Grove.

"No." She was weak in her drugged ecstasy, but obstinate. She jerked back and fell sprawling on the grass.

Heldy levered herself up on her elbows. When she looked at Gramercy the blurred gaze was sober.

"Do you think me fool for staying, Lawgiver? I'll die for certain, but does it matter whether it's next year in childbed or after ten years of riding Tree? It's my life. It never was before, but now it is. And it's my choice."

"It's not your choice." The small knife was steady in Gramercy's hand. "You can go to your husband or to hell, but you're not staying here to feed that."

"An acolyte. After all this time, one of the royal blood comes."

The voice seemed to come from beneath Gramercy's own skin. Heldy leaped

up and ran back into the Grove, and against her will Gramercy turned to face the Serpent.

Its body was smooth, and the sunlight made oil-rainbows on its soft skin. It did not have wings, or legs, or horns, or teeth—only the sinuous betraying length of body and the soft, stupid muzzle. And the eyes—brilliant, alive, and red as blood. Heldy flung her arms around the thick column of body and pressed her face against it, and Gramercy fought down a tide of nausea.

It drew more of its length out into the sunlight and rose on its coils to study Gramercy, weaving softly from side to side.

"Have you come to tend my trees, Summerchild?"

"I tried to send her away!" Heldy cried desperately.

"Shut up." Gramercy's voice was hoarse and flat. Her eyes were on the Serpent. "I have come for Heldy Mattkinwife. Her husband asks for justice."

"Justice, Summerchild? He cries for the return of his chattel, as a child cries for a doll."

The Serpent's croon was reason—sweet seductive traitorous reason. Gramercy was a woman grown now. To listen was to be lost.

"It is Crown law. I am a Lawgiver. I speak for the Law."

"The law is different elsewhere, Summerchild. You cannot judge her. If she has run from her duties, so have you. You have always run."

She tried to look away, to deny it. All she could see was the flickering of

sunlight on leaves.

The flickering of torches.

* * *

Tirza was her older sister, more than twice her age, and on Serpent Nights, when the Grove was lit with torches, Grania would climb out of the window of her nursery room and down the narrow ledge to Tirza's balcony. Together they would watch the procession wind down to the bottom of the Grove. The bride would be carried in a palan quin, wearing white gauze sewn with sequins, and sometimes she and Tirza wouldn't stay till the end but would sneak off to the banqueting hall, where the feast for the bridal party was laid, and filch pomegranate cakes and honeycomb to devour stickily in Tirza's bed. Sometimes they just fell asleep instead. There was a bride nearly every month, after all, since it was the gentle custom of Camasard that the eldest daughter of each noble family married with the Serpent when she was old enough, and there were many noble families in Camasard.

The flickering of torches on her wall woke her, and when Grania clambered from her bed and craned all the way out the window she could see the dots of light moving in the garden, making their way down to the Grove.

Grania was six years old—old enough to think herself equal to adults and young enough to still find them baffling—and on this particular day it had seemed she could do nothing right. Far too early (the sun still shone) she had been banished to Nurse's care and then locked, for her temper, in her small high room with the frieze of orchids and blue monkeys painted on the wall and no particular view of the garden at all.

Her head ached from the sick-sweetness of her dinner pottage, but she had only tasted it before dumping the rest out her window. Now she was hungry as well as cross—but if there was to be a bride, there would be a banquet, and Tirza would take her to get food after they had watched the procession. It was a simple

matter to slip out her window as she had so many times before and climb down onto the ledge that would take her to Tirza's balcony.

But when she arrived, Tirza wasn't there.

"Tirza?"

The flicker of torches made marks on the wall like leaves in a summer forest. The bed had been stripped of coverings, and the bed-hangings were torn. A vial of perfume had broken; the room reeked of flowers, and Grania's bare foot skidded in the spilled oil. She stooped and picked up what was left of the bottle. The stopper was carved as a Bridetree with the Serpent coiled through its branches. It had been Tirza's favorite.

She ran back out onto the balcony. From here she could see that the procession going down to the Grove was very small. There was no music. It wasn't very pretty at all. But Tirza would still want to see it, wouldn't she?

"Tirza?" Grania turned back into the room. Her sister was not old enough to be allowed lovers. It was past time for her to be in her bed. Had someone found out that she and Grania watched the processions. Was that very wrong?

She went through Tirza's bedroom into her wardrobe. Assha was sitting on the floor wailing, and her long black hair trailed around her. Grania had to tug and tug at her sleeve to get the maid's attention.

"Where is Tirza? You are very bad to be sitting here like this without her, Assha. She will whip you when she finds out."

"You stupid little girl!" Assha sobbed. "She will never find out! She has gone to the Serpent!"

But that couldn’t be right. Tirza wasn’t the oldest. Everyone knew that the oldest daughter went to the Serpent, just as everyone knew that Grania’s-father-the-King got to have two wives, while everyone else in Camasard only got to have one. Mersala was the Winterqueen’s daughter, and the oldest, and Grania’s half-sister Mersala had gone to the Serpent the year Grania was born.

She went to find her father and tell him so, but the banquet hall with its hot bright lights frightened her, and so she hid behind a tapestry and wondered how to edge around the room to approach him.

“Filthy brat.”

The voice came from directly above the table in front of Grania—Queen Jacitte, the Winterqueen.

“Let us hope that the Serpent thinks more highly of her than you do.” A voice Grania didn’t recognize.

“Did. We will remember, dear Midran, that Princess Tirza is dead to us all—just as my Mersala is.”

“Highness, she is at rest in the Serpent.”

“Praise to the Serpent,” Queen Jacitte said automatically. “But the Pact, Midran, is for the first daughter of every noble marriage. *Every* marriage—and if he thought that little bitch of a northerner would get away with—”

Grania didn’t wait to hear more. In all her six years of experience there had never been any use in arguing with her othermother’s wishes. She slipped away and ran for the garden.

Grania had never been in the garden at night. She had never been in the Serpent's Grove at all. The smell choked her—a salty, flowery perfume that nauseated her and frightened her without her knowing why. And here, in an orderly spiral, were the bridetrees with their silky white bark.

She made her way to the center of the maze, where once the oldest and now the newest trees were planted. Here was one whose trunk had not quite closed. Tirza's clothes were hung on its branches, and when Grania thrust her small fist into the fissure, she felt her sister's fingers close gently over hers.

Then Grania saw the Serpent. Just a rustle, a night-rainbow sheen limning a darker darkness, and two vast moon-silver eyes like pools of starlight. In that instant she was caught, and as she struggled, the images forced themselves into her unwilling mind.

The Grove. The torches. No music, no incense—they were unimportant beside the Bride that had been brought: dazed, anointed, and drugged on bloodfruit, to be stripped naked, her hair combed free, and placed within her bridal bower and tomb. And then the tree, closing intimately around her in the rapturous dark as the Serpent began its shadowy and forever wooing.

"Child . . . Summerchild, what do you wish of me?"

"Tirza! I want Tirza!"

There was something beyond that, a need that Grania struggled to find words to frame. The Serpent waited patiently, swaying slowly from side to side beneath the unwinking stars.

But in the end Grania was too young, and there was no place ready for her. "*Soon,*" the old Serpent promised. "*You will come to me soon and join all my*

lovely ones, my jewels . . .”

The Serpent’s spell shattered. Tirza’s fingers went slack in hers, and Grania tore her fingers free and ran.

No one saw her. She ran, and fell, and got up to run until she could run no more, and then she cried until she slept from sheer exhaustion. When she woke she was cold and mist-wet, and the sky was the late-night color of early dawn.

She was royal and raised to be pious. She took off her earrings and her armband to offer them in thanks to the Serpent’s mercy, but when she thought about going back to the Grove, she started to cry again, so she threw them in the lake instead and began to walk. The garden had no walls here because it bordered on one of her father’s hunting parks, and when the grass got tall and rough, she just kept walking. She found water to drink and some berries that were small and sour and very little like the ones she was often fed for supper in the royal nursery, served with crumbled cake and cream. But she kept walking.

Eventually she reached the river Camasard. It was twilight, with the sun just catching the gilded spires of the city, and she was tired and dirty and thirsty and remembering that she hadn’t said good-bye to Tirza, and Tirza was alone in the dark forever.

So Grania sat down on the bank and would have cried again if she had thought it would do her the least good, and just as there was no more sun anywhere, a cart came up and offered her a ride across the ford.

When they found she had no one to go to, they asked her to stay with them. She wouldn’t tell them her name, but once she almost did, and after that they called her *God Grants Mercy,* saying it would be good for her to have that to comfort her if she had to make her way alone in the world.

They were travelers who worshiped The God Who Dies Frequently, whose name is too sacred to say. When they headed back to Camasard the next year, she left them to go north with another caravan. When it reached Alarra two years later, she left that, too. Alarra was the largest city she had ever seen, and no one there had ever heard of the Serpent.

She stole, and was caught, and was sold to the Scrivener's Guild; but she did not have the patience the work demanded and so was sold again. Only this time they called it indentured, and they said she would be fed and clothed and paid and freed, and since she had her letters she was apprenticed in a law-doctor's office in Alarra.

In all that time she never spoke of who and what she had been. Her new master shortened her name to Gramercy, and when he died, he left her his seat in the College of Law and money enough to buy a circuit court.

"You have always run. Run to me now, Summerqueen's daughter."

"Never!" Gramercy snapped. She forced herself to look away from the spellbinding eyes and saw that Heldy had returned, standing at the edge of the Grove, watching her with hungry, angry eyes. "You take and you give nothing! Thief and liar—I witness your crimes and call the Crown to witness that I will see the justice I was asked to give done here."

"Human justice. I give peace and relief from pain to those who seek me. Is that such a small thing, Crown's Justice? I take only what I am offered. I promise nothing I do not give. Where is the hurt? Give up your hate. Come. Yield to me—"

If the Serpent were just, it would not compel. If it were just, the Serpent would not hide alone in the dark. If it were just, Tirza would be alive now.

Tirza had wanted to live.

"Never! Your peace is death." Gramercy took one step backward, then another. If Heldy would not go with her, she must go alone.

"Don't you care that it feeds on you—don't you care about that, even?" she asked the woman. Mattkin would help her burn the grove. The Serpent would die.

"*But Heldy Nomansdaughter* is *free. She has made her own choice. She is her own woman at last. Free."*

"I'm free," Heldy echoed stubbornly.

"Be free then," Gramercy said, and turned to run.

Her foot tangled on a root that she would have sworn was not there a moment before. She fell full-length upon the ground, and Heldy landed on her back like a lioness, snarling and clawing. Gramercy saw stars as Heldy sank her fingers into her throat. She was almost grateful when the Serpent intervened.

"*No, my jewel. Let her live. There will be another tree for you."*

Almost.

Heldy dragged her to her feet and turned her around.

"*You want to live, Summerqueen's daughter, and I am your life, your earliest memory, the western paradise where you will sleep, reborn in me,"* the Serpent said, and its blood-red eyes rose like moons in Gramercy's sight.

She watched her hands undress herself, and heard the phantom music of a long-lost kingdom as she hung tabard and tunic and skirt upon the branches of the open tree. The Serpent’s thoughts were hers, and so she knew that Heldy would set her mule wandering so that it was found far away.

And Gramercy Lawgiver would sleep in the tree and give up her life to the bearing of its blood-dark fruit and be one in the uncounted number of the Serpent’s cherished brides.

The heartwood of the tree was smooth against her back. She curled herself into the space provided, and the soft treemarrow settled around her. The Serpent’s eyes hung before her sight, eclipsing the daylight as the opening in the trunk narrowed.

Then it blinked, slowly, and her mind was free to know that she was being entombed alive.

She felt the tree’s life throbbing around her. She was pierced, impaled, felt its tap-root striking upward into her body as the tree prepared to twine its life with hers. She screamed, and only drove herself deeper into the horror, and through it all she felt the Serpent waiting.

The woman without a name stood upon a high place, and cities stretched below her: goldsmith’s toys in glass and precious metal. Every citizen’s heart was open to her; she learned all their stories and then spread her eagle wings and flew on.

In her dreams she lived a hundred lives, skin-dancing through every might-have-been. Queen, mother, priestess, thief: she was sorceress and siren as she

gave and took the kisses of a thousand scarlet-eyed lovers. It was the dream the dragon spun for its entombed brides, and pressing close beside her in the warm dark she felt the murmuring sister-voices. Never lonely, never cold, never afraid, and always, always, the dream.

But she had not come here willingly. She searched through dreams for the thing she had not renounced, and in the end she found it.

Princess Grania of Camasard. Gramercy Lawgiver of Alarra. They stood before her: the child in her kilt and royal jewels; the judge in her blue robes. *“Show me the truth,” she said, stretching out her starved ghost-hands to them.*

Hand in hand they quartered the kingdoms of the earth. She saw what the child had not: that the king and the Serpent ruled together in Camasard, binding the nobles to them with blood and indulgence and the mysteries of the Serpent’s Grove. She saw what the Lawgiver had not: that the Serpent’s coming meant southern war and Camasard fallen, and Alarra to fall in its turn if it welcomed the Serpent and its worship.

“But why?”

She saw heroism and errantry, nobility, brutality: kingdoms rise and fall and rise again to conquer the earth and challenge the very gods in the stars, and always there was the Serpent, waiting and offering its “freedom.”

She saw no doom. But the princess of Camasard knew that the Serpent could not see the future, only remember the past.

Her name was Gramercy and this was her past, their past, what her race had possessed and been, stolen from them by these creatures who stole . . .

Futures.

Without a future who would save, and make, and build? No one labored only for his own comfort, but when the children he labored to comfort did not exist . . .

Her outrage swept her back into the dark. There was no dream now, no lying visions. The Serpent was death, explicit as a blade. The penalty for a woman's murder was death. The penalty for a race's destruction . . .

Death.

"You will die," Gramercy promised. *"Justice will be done."*

"Never," said the Serpent.

She stood upon a high place and twisted the dream away from endless sunlit lands to plead her case. She felt the Serpent's brides around her like a harrowing of ghosts, and she dreamed for them a land barren of women, a country of old men.

"This is the Serpent's promise! See it!"

The Grove around her could not bear that thought. The trees rocked and groaned like ship's timbers in a high wind, and against the beckoning sunlight of the dream she set more scenes of desolation. Of abandoned children dying in their cradles. Of fields, unsown and unharvested. Of towns, crumbled to dust and inhabited only by the predators of the night, bled to death woman by woman by woman, each thinking the choosing of her own freedom negligible . . .

"No one is free. The Serpent lied. Our parents kept faith with us. We owe their

faith to our children.”

Not to desert them, not to abandon them unborn, not to surrender them to the dark and the Serpent’s lying covenant of ease.

“I do not lie. You have betrayed me, Summerqueen’s daughter. Go.”

She clung to the dream to use it—but it was taken from her.

Gramercy watched with mad eyes as the trunk of the bridetree crept slowly open once more. The flesh of the tree left her body, and she groped her way free—a wild stick-figure, a scarecrow ghost. The watery winter sunlight was cold on her skin. When she stood outside the tree at last, she could look back and see the heartwood flushed dark with human blood and the imprint of her body captured in a web of blind white tendrils. On the tree’s ice-heavy branches her clothes were bleached to rags by half a year of passing seasons.

At its foot lay the body of Heldy Mattkinwife, no man’s wife now. She was no more than a scattering of bones and rags that insects and small predators had left behind. The knife she had used to end her life in despair lay rusted among their leavings. Gramercy could not even manage to feel sorrow.

She dragged her clothes from the tree with weak and shaking hands and tried to remember how to cover herself.

“Leave this place.”

The Serpent towered above her, ice-rime hanging from its muzzle and making a cobweb pattern on its rainbow skin.

She finally got the tunic over her head. Her scalp—hairless now—was cold.

“I will see justice done here.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper from lack of use. She looked at the Serpent, and now its eyes did not dazzle. “For your murders, you will die. I will return—and I’ll come with fire.”

There was a lightness in her heart that had never come with the dream. She served the law, and the law would serve.

“Your Law is vengeance, and it will fail you. But hear mine: live long, Summerqueen’s daughter, and know that never again shall you approach me nearly enough to do harm or good. Live knowing that never again will I open paradise to you. I loved you, and you betrayed me. Now I reject you as you have rejected me. Go.”

The summer scent of bloodfruit rose in her nostrils and on it rode the Serpent’s slow vengeance: an alchemy of body and blood that drove her sobbing and retching from the winter Grove.

She walked five miles through the snow on bleeding feet and collapsed in the dooryard of a charcoal burners’ cot. He nursed her through the winter in exchange for such small chores as she was able to do; and in the spring she begged torch and firepot of him, and went back through the wood, and found that the Serpent had not lied.

In this season the bridetrees flowered. The soft scent hung on the air and drove her retching before it. The firepot spilled its weight of coals onto the wet spring grass, and the torch rolled down the slope into the stream. Gramercy lay upon the ground sick and helpless and could force herself no closer.

She could not enter the Grove.

No man had ever come to the Serpent's Grove in all the history of Camasard. It was a woman's mystery, for reasons beyond law or politics. And now this Serpent had rendered itself as safe from her as if Gramercy had been born a man. She could not destroy it. She could not even approach it. The Serpent had won.

The villagers of Baicy would not help her. The soldiers at Rayne would not believe her claims without the proofs that were lost. Gramercy Lawgiver had been dead many months; why should they? And by the time she could make her way south to Alarra again and prove her identity, years would have passed.

If she could reach Alarra. If anyone believed her story.

But justice was owed. To Mattkin Smith. To the Crown. To Heldy Nomansdaughter. And to Tirza of Camasard.

Not the Crown's Justice, but hers.

Gramercy stood and walked away from the Grove.

She had been a princess of the royal house of Camasard. She had been Lawgiver for the Crown of Alarra. She had chosen to cease to be each of these things.

It was late spring. The new grass was soft under her scarred feet, and in the still twilight air she could hear the ring of hammer against anvil a good distance away. She walked into the smithy and stood until the smith noticed her. He was a tall man, broad and blond like all the folk of Baicy.

"Since you haven't a wife, I'll stay," she said. "You asked me for justice. This

is what I have to give."

And the Serpent in the Grove sang its victory.

"And shall I have a new doll when I am done, Mother?"

The small child, blonde like her father's folk, looked trustingly up at her mother.

"Dolls, and spicebread, and apples—all that you could want, Tirza."

"But, Mother, why do we have to burn the trees?"

"Because I promised, sweeting. Now just do this for me, and we can go home."

Gramercy watched her daughter toddle down the hill to the Grove, the Grove from whose lethal perfume she herself had taken good care to stay far away.

It must be now, this year. Last year Tirza Matt kinsdaughter had been too small to lift the firepot. Next year she might be old enough to hear the Serpent. It must be now.

Men could not endure the Serpents. Women succumbed to them. But a child was safe from all a Serpent's lures. Her child, the daughter she'd stayed with Mattkin Smith to get. The child whose life—a long life, and a happy one—would pay for Tirza's death.

Down in the Grove, she saw the first bloom of fire. It was a big Serpent, and ancient. It would starve without its Grove long before it could gather new brides.

She watched her daughter walk back up the hill toward her, free forever, as the fire bloomed in the distance.

The Serpent had been wrong. The law was not vengeance. The law was justice.

And Gramercy Mattkinwife did not give up what she loved.

THE LIGHT OF RA

Phaedra M. Weldon

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“ Isis, what secret did Ra give to you?” I asked my brother’s wife as she lay beside me.

Many had asked her this question. None had ever gotten an answer.

We rested bare beneath sheets spun of silk the color of flowing blood. Our bodies sparkled with the sweat of lovemaking, mine dimpling with the cold breeze that blew through the open windows of my home. Nymphs of night-blooming narcissus bowed to my desire and perfumed the air, mingling with the smell of our passion.

A golden spiral draped from the bed’s canopy hid us from view and covered us in night-driven shadows. I took in the slope of her shoulder where her raven-black hair moved over her breast and pooled within the crook of my arm.

Guilt pressed hard against my chest, taking with it the Mother’s breath that held me in her arms. I was a man given over to the needs of her body, to the passions of mortal flesh. My heart was hers.

I did not truly care for Ra’s secret, the Sun God’s secret name, nor the coming

and going of my brother Osiris into and out of Egypt. I cared only for the woman in my arms who so blindly loved a man who would never return such feeling to her in kind.

Osiris had been gone on his campaigns for nearly two years, and I had remained at his request to watch over his wife. Upon his return, he had filled his gullet with wine and food instead of pleasuring in his wife’s arms.

And in a drunken stupor Osiris had told me of his conquests of golden-haired beauties across the whole of Egypt and beyond.

He cared little for the heart of his wife, and though my own guilt for taking Isis to bed marked my soul with remorse, I burned incense and gave thanks to Ra that such stolen moments as these were mine.

And so I had stood by her side, a constant shadow, as she gave her people life, healed the sick, restored the wounded, and bade the Earth to give over plentiful harvests. She was a sorceress of great power, the daughter of gods.

And I loved her, my heart forever a captive of her purity.

She had everything a woman could desire in this world, save the love of her lord and king. The people believed her powerful. Prevailing. Incorruptible.

Yet in whispers they called her cursed.

In all the years of their reign, Osiris and Isis had not borne a child. There flourished no heir to the throne of Egypt. The priests of Ra declared the light of the Sun God had turned away from Isis—that her barrenness came from her magic, from her use of sorcery.

And I had watched her carry the weight of this judgment with quiet dignity, even as she clung to the hope that one day her husband would return to her bed and give to her a child to love.

Though I would have gladly given my seed to her cause and brought a child into this world, Isis used her magic to prevent conception.

Isis sat up. I felt the brush of her dark hair on my arm. She left the bed, abandoning the color of royalty, giving over her exquisite body to the night's cool caress as she walked to the window. A potted palm swayed in the night's breeze on the terrace outside.

I rose as well and walked to her, my own dark tresses falling in curls over my shoulders, pushed aside by the Mother's breath. I wished to abandon myself to the night, to fly high in the heavens as I once did in my youth, before taking up the responsibilities of being my brother's Right-Hand. I yearned for freedom. I yearned to be free of shame.

I yearned for her to love me as I loved her.

"Set, why must you know such a thing?" Her voice was deep, intoxicating to hear. Power filled it, swelled over me, and pulled me closer to her. "You ask this for another—Thoth, perhaps?"

I cringed inwardly at the mention of my brother's vizier, the tall, imposing figure of Osiris' former Right-Hand. In truth, both men had come to me and bade me ask the queen of her secrets.

"She trusts you," Osiris had said to me, picking an apple from the bowl on my table. "She will talk to you."

Thoth had laughed from the door. “Perhaps your job is best suited as the councilor of women, brother Set, and not the Right-Hand of the King.”

I had looked to Osiris, ignoring the snorting of Thoth. “Perhaps it would be best if you spoke to her—gained her trust?” I offered such council often to my brother.

And as always he’d brushed it aside with a wave of his hand, as waving away a dung fly. “I have other things to occupy my time.”

I knew he had meant he had other beds to sleep upon.

Isis’ movement from the doorway brought my attention away from memories of the previous day and back to the enjoyable company of the night. She turned and looked up at me. I was lost in those eyes, dark obsidian pools filled with the night’s starry sky. “They fear me, Set?”

I put my hands on her muscled shoulders. Her skin was like a newborn lamb’s coat, and I ran my fingers down her arms to her waist. “I do not know, My Lady.”

I heard her breath catch in her throat as I pulled her closer to me. Though her heart belonged to my brother, her body was mine. I brushed my lips across hers. “I do not fear you.”

“No . . .” she whispered before returning my kiss. She pulled away from me. “But perhaps you should . . .”

I wanted her. I knew her as my brother never would. My heart called out to me when I saw fear in her eyes. “Isis?”

“They should all fear me, Set,” she said. “The power of Ra’s secret name.

Even I fear what I have done." She moved into my arms, and our bodies locked together. "Today I brought a child from the dead brother-lover. He had not yet stepped upon the road of the dead and still lingered nearby. I called out the words—Ra's secret name—and he came back."

She shivered in my arms.

I pulled her away and looked into her face. "Gra cious Lady, what is it you fear? You have given a child back his life, a mother back her love."

Her dark eyes sought out mine. "No, Set. I sentenced a free soul to an eternity locked inside a shell that no longer wanted him. His destiny had been death, and I changed that. He does not eat, nor does he sleep or move. He answers only when asked and does as his parents wish. But in his eyes, there is no life. Only despair." She closed her eyes. "Ra warned me of the consequences, and I did not understand. I stood beside that silent child and looked at my hands. I felt as if I died a little in the giving of life. I wish never to do that again."

I pulled her close and held her and made her a promise under the moonlight. "Then by my heart, Isis, you never will."

Osiris roared at me when I denied him what he sought. We stood together in his chambers, a small, private lodging so near to the throne room that I was sure the cooks and servants could hear the King's angry cries.

His polished gold floors were a battlefield of hand-made pots collected from his travels, all strewn from his empty bed of rolled silk to the mirror decorated with golden calves. The smell of sandalwood hung in the air as a palpable cloud.

We were both dressed casually in shifts of pleated linen. I had pulled my hair back into a golden queue, though Osiris kept his long and curled over his shoulders to match his coiled beard.

Thoth held his customary place in a corner chair. He peeled an apple in his ringed fingers and cut off pieces with a goat-hilted knife to eat them. I didn't want him in there.

I didn't want him to know of my love for Isis. Or our trysts.

Osiris' handsome face swelled with rage as he paced, his sandals clacking on the floor. There was the odd crunch here and there when his solid weight pressed down on broken pottery. "You are my brother!"

I held up my hands to him. "And you are her husband!" I held in check my disgust with him. "She did not give me the secret, brother. And I did not press her for it."

Osiris took in several angry breaths then stopped his pacing. He rubbed his stubbled chin and fixed me with his hawkish eyes. "But it *is* true—she gave life to the dead child. She *can* defeat death."

I nodded. "But it wasn't something she would wish to do again." I did not tell him why because he would never understand.

"She can cheat death, your highness," Thoth said from his corner. I cast my gaze at him briefly. He looked more like a denizen of the underworld than an advisor. "Think of such a power. If killed in battle, you could be brought back to life. If the people knew their king was immortal . . ." Thoth shrugged as he chewed on a piece of apple. "It may quiet their cries for an heir."

"I need no heir," he snapped and turned away. He put his hands squarely on his hips. "*I* rule this kingdom. But this news also delays our plans to destroy her magic."

I stared at the king. He would work such an insidious plan against his own wife? And why? I asked this of him in no small a voice.

But it was Thoth who answered. “Because her popularity grows stronger among the people than the king’s,” Thoth stood from his chair and folded his arms over bare chest. “That can not be permitted.”

Osiris turned and looked at me. I felt uncomfortable beneath his weighted gaze. “You *love* her.”

I would not deny this. My heart would never allow it.

“She is *my* wife.”

I nodded. “She loves you, brother. That is something I will never have of hers.”

He continued to stare at me, but I knew from the glaze over his eyes that his thoughts were somewhere else. “And this . . . this angers you? That she loves me and not you?”

“Angers me?” I shook his head. “No. Isis will love whom she loves. She loves you, her husband, and she only wishes to do right by her people.”

Osiris remained quiet.

Too quiet.

Osiris departed two nights later, again on another campaign.

Two weeks after his departure, I was dragged from Isis' bed, against her protestations and brought to the dungeon and held in chains. The jailers whipped my body repeatedly as I pled my innocence to whatever it was I was accused of.

After days of hanging suspended from my wrists, I was placed on a rack and bound hand and foot as two priests of Ra cut out my tongue.

I could not remember how long I lay in my cell of dried wheat, feces and fleas. I didn't know what it was I had been punished for and feared that it was for my love of the queen, my sister-lover. I had partaken of the queen's flesh. I wept because Osiris had not come to me and given me forgiveness.

I wept because Isis had not protected me.

Yet I feared even more for what may have befallen my heart, my love.

Isis.

I was dragged from my cell, chained to a rotting post across my back and led to the throne room of the king and queen.

The torches were lit with Ra's light. It flickered against the throne room's high walls, casting shadows against the statues of my family. The people stood behind and beside those great monuments, raising their fists at me with anger.

I could not speak to them. I could not defend my innocence. I was whipped as I ascended the steps to the throne, and I smelled and tasted my own blood, the salt of my own sweat. I was mortal in this moment, stripped of all rank and privilege.

Relief took some of my pain away when I saw Isis. She stood before the throne of the king, her hair braided with gold, her dress of pleated linen a base for the turquoise and gold necklace of office upon her breast.

Of Osiris I saw nothing.

I quivered as I was pressed to my knees, my arms held fast to my back. Something terrible had happened.

“Set, brother of Osiris,” Isis’ voice echoed through the chamber and her people became silent. “You are accused of murdering the king.”

I looked up at her, my own expression mirroring the surprise and horror I felt. Murdering the king?

She did not look at me, but I saw the tears fall like diamonds from her kohl-rimmed eyes. “They say you were jealous of my husband’s power. They say you and your men attacked him.”

She did look down at me then, and in those eyes I saw disbelief. Rage. Terror.

Fear.

She did not believe these stories, and yet she feared something. Someone else’s hand pressed her to this end. But who if the king was truly dead?

“They say you hacked him to pieces and scattered him about the earth.”

I tried to pull free of my captors but could not break away from the chains. I was immediately struck from behind across my head. Images of my brother’s

body cut into bloodied pieces of meat remained in my mind.

Osiris!

My senses dulled and I nearly fell. The crowd cheered. I could not protest! I had not killed the king!

“Who has accused him?” said a voice behind me. I knew this to be the jailer—my defender. It was his job to speak for me.

The room fell silent.

I blinked several times to call her image to mind, the one of her in my arms, our bodies moving soft as velvet against one another. I needed to see her as lover and as friend.

I could not bear it if she were my accuser.

“I accuse you.”

I knew that voice.

Thoth.

He came into view beside Isis, stepping out from behind the royal throne of gold and inlaid turquoise. He too was dressed in regal robes, white, pleated linen and gold sandals almost as splendid as Osiris’. I watched as Thoth looked up and addressed the people. “I heard him devise the king’s death with my own ears. He coveted our beloved Osiris’ power.” He looked down at me, kneeling on the

steps to the throne of Egypt.

A roar threatened to take down the throne room's very ceiling. I struggled to rise and saw Thoth place a hand on the queen's shoulder.

She flinched and closed her eyes but continued to stand straight and tall before her people.

I knew in that moment Osiris had died at the hands of Thoth, and he now used me as his scapegoat. And somehow he held Isis in his power. What had he done to her? Had he threatened her in some way?

"It is for our queen to lay the sentence for the King's murderer," Thoth said. "She must speak the will of Ra."

Isis opened her eyes and looked at me. Tears fell again, and I felt my own eyes burn with my overwhelming love for her. I would accept whatever punishment she would give. I knew in that simple gaze she believed me innocent.

A dark countenance overtook her beautiful face, and in that instant I knew the power of the dark Mother.

Isis stepped forward, away from Thoth. "I vow to hunt the earth for the body of my beloved, your king, and when I have found him, I will bring him back to Egypt. With the blessings of Ra, I will give him life again."

The crowds cheered. Thoth took a step back, his expression revealing his inner horror.

I looked at Isis. No!

I remembered the fear in her eyes, the look of terror at what she had done with the child.

She had found her own way to fight Thoth’s betrayal.

The dawn of comprehension came to me then as I knelt in supplication, deafened by the cheers of the people for their queen and her magic.

I remembered the conversation in Osiris’ chambers. The look of thought on Osiris’ face. The news of his wife’s power.

This had been a plan devised not only by Thoth, but by the king himself.

And then I thought it a wrong idea. Osiris would never have agreed to have his body chopped into pieces. Unless . . .

To destroy the body—would there be any hope that the spirit would return? Perhaps Thoth had destroyed the king’s body, believing it impossible to reanimate. And he had cut out my tongue, depriving me of my right of defense.

Why had he not killed me?

I looked at Isis again and watched the tears. My beloved, what is it you will do? What monster will you return to the people of Egypt?

And at what price?

She forced a smile, but would not look at me, and my heart wept.

I was kept in the camps as the caravans searched for Osiris' body. I was chained and held day and night in a box that allowed only enough room to kneel or to pull my knees to my chest and sleep. I was given little food and even less water, until I was unable to stand without being held.

There were nights I would wake from nightmares of beasts with the head of Osiris that slashed at my flesh. And then Isis would be beside me in my dream, caressing me, telling me all would be well. And I would tell her not to do such a thing—not to bring back the king.

But when I awoke, I was alone and hungry, broken and sick.

I have no memory of how long the search took, only that one day we returned to the palace. The air was colder as I was bathed, fed, my hair clipped and combed.

And I was perfumed, dressed in a shift of pleated white linen and brought to Isis' private chambers.

The night was open to me. A cool breeze touched my skin, and I again thought of our last night together under the moon.

I lay on her bed, not strong enough to move or try for escape. There were no bindings, no chains that held me there.

I smelled the sweet musk of her body and felt her first touch upon my lips.

“Ssshhhhh . . .” she whispered in my ear. “I must tell you things before the priests come.”

I looked over at her as her lips brushed mine. Water to a thirsty man. I longed to take her in my arms, to pull her closer to me. But I didn’t dare. I feared there were guards hidden in the room and I was again to be accused and punished.

“My dearest Set,” she said as she sat beside me and looked down. Her hair was plaited into hundreds of tiny braids, decorated with tiny beads of amber. Her eyes were kohl rimmed and her lips dyed with beets.

Her skin was luminous, and her dark eyes held my own in her power.

“Thoth threatened to kill you if I did not agree to accuse you of Osiris’ death,” Isis’ voice was low, burdened with remorse. “He threatened to expose our lovemaking to the world. My heart is heavy with the horrors you have suffered. Please . . . forgive me.”

I stared up at her and felt the oceans of time brim over my eyes and fall to the silken pillows beneath my head. She had not forsaken me. And as she kissed me, I drank in her softness but did not have the strength to take her in my arms.

If only to say her name.

She hovered over me and wiped the tears from my face. “He did not wish me to bring the king back. He fears Osiris’ wrath.” Isis shook her head. “I do not. I will die a little again when I use Ra’s name to bring my king back to this world.”

I wanted to tell her no. I didn’t want her to risk her soul for a man who did not love her.

She put a finger to my parched lips. “I have found all of Osiris, my beloved Set. Save for one piece. The only part of him I ever wanted.”

One piece.

I did not need for her to tell me which. I guessed it to be the one piece of him she had never possessed.

His heart.

“The people call for their king, and as a sorceress queen, I am called to answer that promise I made to them.” She gave me a slight smile.

I shook my head.

“I must restore my people’s hope, Set,” she ran her fingers through my hair. “And you must help me. I ask this as your queen and as your lover.”

I did not understand at first. Not until I saw priestesses in flowing white fill the room as well, bringing with them the scent of narcissus as they began removing the shift to reveal my nakedness.

Isis leaned in near me and kissed my cheek. “Osiris must be brought before the priests whole. I know it was my husband’s wish to be brought back from the underworld, thinking he would cheat death and deny me and his people an heir.”

I saw the flash of a knife.

I tried to move, tried to struggle, but the priestesses held me still. So weak I had become that even the slightest strength of the smallest woman could hold me prisoner.

But I knew what they intended to do.

Isis would to take my heart!

She could not! Without my heart I could never love her. I would never remember our nights of perfect paradise beneath the moon. I would be only half a man, half a god, only half alive. What is life without love? Would that she took some other part of me, but not my love.

Oh what punishment beneath the heavens for loving so deeply my husband's wife!

I cried out. A ghastly noise filled with the anguish of lost love.

Isis put her hand over my lips.

"Be still, brother-lover," Isis said in my ear. She held the knife in her hand. "You will have your revenge upon Thoth, as will I. But Osiris must be made whole. I will bring him back, and he will find himself without his manhood." She smiled at me. "He will instead have yours."

I screamed beneath her fingers as the knife flashed.

"I am the justice of my people."

* * *

Osiris sat on his throne as a small male child of five played at his feet. His shaved head gleamed beneath the torches of Ra's light. I knelt beside little Horus and handed him a cow I had carved from a block of wood and painted that morning.

The child's eyes widened, and he wrapped his thin arms around my neck. "Thank you, Uncle Set!"

He moved from the throne and scrambled down the stairs to where his mother, Isis, sat with her new vizier and discussed the workings of the city.

I moved back to Osiris. Drool had collected on his chest again, where it trailed from his open mouth. I took up a cloth and wiped the mess away, ever conscious of my brother's eyes on me, crouching nearer so that he could wholly see me.

I smiled at him and spoke with the tongue of my enemy. I thought of Thoth, languishing in the very cell he'd hoped to bury me in with no voice in which to beg for mercy. "You believed you could cheat death, dear brother. And your vizier believed he could cheat you."

I looked into his dead eyes and saw my brother's rage peering out at me again. "I believed Isis would take my heart, and I would be robbed of love. But instead she gave you my manhood, and from that seed has grown a child. *My* child." I smiled at him. "I have won, Osiris. For though I may never lay with Isis again, I will always love her. And that you cannot take away from me."

He made not a sound as I kissed his cheek. A breeze came through the throne room's open walls behind the great chairs, and I straightened and looked out over the whole of Egypt, a golden cen terpiece, bathed in the light of Ra.

TIME AND MEMORY

Leslie Claire Walker

Leslie Claire Walker hails from the lush bayous and concrete jungles of the Texas Gulf Coast, where she lives with a dog, a cat, and various plant companions. Her short story, "As the Crow Flies," appeared in *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future, Volume XVI*. She is at work on a novel about a faded town that has lost its stories and the woman who risks more than her life to bring them back. Leslie is enchanted with hags, sirens, and other bad girls—and feels lucky to know quite a few of them.

I know exactly what I'm doing on a May afternoon like this with the failing light shining down on me: reading the pattern of the scattered clouds in the blue of the sky, recognizing signs in the angle of stones, in the way wind parts brush and grass. The Queen Sorceress circling the human.

The whole world should smell thick and green, juicy after the morning's rain. It does to someone, but not to me. Not since my heart froze.

Twenty feet away, three crows perch in the hawthorn tree among its bright red berries. They fluff their feathers and—caw! caw!—take flight in a violent rush of wings. They know a predator when they see one, and which one of us rates higher on the food chain.

Even a god's luck won't help the man slumbering under that tree, his bard's harp beside him.

The soles of his brown leather boots are worn thin—just like the thread of his

suede pants and his finely made, wrinkled and stained white shirt. No poor man, this. Dirty or not.

A thick root cradles his head, his brown hair dappled in sun and shade. His face is clean shaven—and drawn, even in repose. I've seen that look a thousand times before from the fletched side of the arrow.

I consider not getting my hopes up, but I can't help myself. He could be the last mortal I steal away.

I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to walk in this world. How much longer until the veil between the human realm and my own becomes impossible to cross. This time it had been harder, even with two of us. Our most powerful magic had nearly not been enough.

Our need is urgent.

Still, there are rules I must follow to take the mortal from this place. I focus on him. On my need. On his mouth. His mouth is a mystery: lips the color of bruised strawberries. Thick and the top one bowed just so. A very kissable mouth.

The thought travels the threads of my mind, out on the wind of my breath that he takes into his body with every inhalation. I sink to the ground. Gather my skirts around me and wait patiently for him to wake. Or at least as patiently as I've become accustomed to wait for mortals. Which is not at all.

Three heartbeats and I do it again—I infect him with my desire. On he sleeps, this insensitive human.

Would you believe I have to jostle the man to get a reaction?

Only then do his eyes flutter open. He blinks twice before he takes in my silvery, shimmering dress and fixes his gaze on my face. Which I've made beautiful for him. I can have creamy skin and fair hazel eyes when I want to, and I could have any color hair, but black it is. Black as my lascivious heart. The care on his face dissolves into lust. It fills him until it reaches out in an earnest smile. Until it oozes from his pores. "My Lady," he says. Capital letters and all.

But they've all said that.

He looks beyond me for my escort, but of course I don't have one. At least not one he would recognize. "You must be a dream, Lady."

I've heard that one before, too. "Of all the things in this world, that's one thing I'm not."

He doesn't believe me. It's written in his intoxicated expression. "If you're not a dream, then you must be the Queen of Heaven."

I shake my head. "Of all the titles in this world, that one does not belong to me."

He rises up on his elbow. Closer to me. Twines the fingers of one hand with mine. The heat of his skin passes to mine. "A kiss, I beg of you. If I knew your kiss and if I died tomorrow, I'd die a happy man."

What—no small talk? I smile a little at that, but I don't show all my teeth. If I did, he might run, and I can't afford that. "What's your name?"

"Thomas."

Of course it is. I say his name—savor the feel of the syllables—how open. How full. “I’ll grant you that wish.”

Anticipation grabs me, a hand on my throat. The chance to see through his eyes.

The opportunity to feel the way a human feels, without such a gulf of distance. To feel his heart.

He draws me in, so easy. First touch: soft, like rose petals. And strong. There’s willfulness in this kiss. Gentle-rough.

The click of his teeth on my own. A playful nip. His tongue and the clean salt taste of him. Exploring. Demanding. He tasted like sex. The rush. The give and take. The surrender.

Beneath that? Time and memory.

His exhausted, fearful slumber here in this place. And before that, before he lay down—sucking air, lungs heaving and speared with stabbing pain from the mad run through the clearing—and before that, the stumbling through the woods. Back in time, across a wildflower field. Away from the earl in the adjacent lands, the earl’s men and their barking, howling hounds.

Before that: In the dew-soaked field in the stillness before dawn. The feel of the woman’s hair in his hands. The earl’s wife. Soft cheek and palms flat against his bare chest.

She cries out he loses control gives over to oblivion every vein and artery pulsing sky and ground spinning rising stars racing down to meet them—

Slick. Wet. Life.

She smelled like lavender, and her hair fell in exaggerated waves where he'd pulled loose her braids. He fisted his hands in it while they moved together in the dark.

And beyond all that.

Back to where he'd breathed miles and years of road dust with only the clothes he wore and washed carefully in streams he crossed on his travels. The bard's harp in its leather case, slung over his shoulder. Every few nights, a new town. A new song for a stable boy, a noble family, or a king. It didn't matter to him, not who they are, and not their station.

The cause of his wandering: his father's grave. Cairn of rocks. Endless ripping wind over field and heart. Harsh and unforgiven.

His mother had died in childbirth.

No boyhood for this one. No joy except in the wandering. In seeing the world. In knowing and loving all the people he met. In their humanity.

He breaks off the kiss, his eyes finally unclouded. Awake. Utterly awake. I notice only because I make myself. For survival. Even though all I want is to drown in him. His thoughts, happiness, pain—so bright, so full of flavor. I could step more deeply into him.

I cup his face in my hands. Such a handsome face.

“Stay with me.” His voice pitches low, pregnant with promise.

The kiss—the way he made me feel—he’s passed the first test. He’s mine now. “That’s not how it works, Thomas.”

“How what works?”

I sigh because he won’t like what I’m about to say. And because I know enough about his past, but I can’t see his future. Not yet.

I have to let that wondrous kiss go for now. *Let go.*

I push to my feet and stand him up, too. He brushes the grass from the seat of his pants. I feel enough to pick a few blades from his hair. “If you knew who I was, you might not have kissed me. If you had any inkling what falling asleep under a hawthorn might mean for you, your name being Thomas, you would’ve found yourself a nice, shady oak. Don’t listen much to rumors, do you?”

“Rumors?”

“You’ll be coming with me now.”

“Where would we go?” He asks like a man who hasn’t realized how deep he’s in.

“My home. You belong to me now. For seven years of service.”

“What?” He tries to backpedal. Screws up his face with the effort. But his legs don’t move. He’s in my thrall. “Who are you?”

“Your worst nightmare,” I say. After all, it’s true. And I might dissemble

sometimes, but I never lie. “I’m the Queen of Sorcery. Queen of the Fae.”

“Devil!” he hisses, eyes wide.

Why do humans always assume one or the other? God or his opposite? Day or night? Couldn’t he see the perfectly good gloaming already upon us? I thin my lips. “Open your eyes a wee bit wider. And move over.”

The words don’t quite reach through his panic. I push him aside to make way for the white horse that wanders in from behind him. White as bone, blue-eyed like a certain king I know, with a silver-belled bridle and no saddle. A king who’d come with me out of love, even if I don’t feel that love anymore.

A moment ago, the beast hadn’t been there. But a moment ago, the whole world changed.

Thomas’s world changed.

“You’re that one?” he asks. “You’re real?”

“You kissed me—you tell me.”

“But—”

“You didn’t think Faery Tales were true?”

The horse paws the dirt. He has less patience than I.

“Mount up,” I say. Thomas would rather not, but his feet and legs and arms move of their own volition.

I climb up behind him and settle my skirts, balancing with the shift of hooves. The horse snorts. Turns its head. Meets my gaze. I pat his flank once. Time to go.

He digs in and launches us forward, eating earth with each increasing stride until we're traveling faster than any horse should be able to gallop. Not across stone and soil and grass but into the veil that separates our world from this one. Behind us, the crows have reclaimed their residence in the tree. They strut the branches and shout, most of it angry and obscene.

Those birds—they make me laugh, even if the humor doesn't warm me inside.

The veil hardly gives. It feels like walking in water at the exact moment it freezes. Where there's room to move, in the next beat it's gone. The horse and I, we bob and weave and leap. The cold seeps into us. Into our flesh and muscle and bone. Into our souls.

We find the small stream, the crack in the ice.

A way through.

The crows have gone; maybe they are only in Thomas' world and have no echo here. The land shifts ever so slightly. It looks a good deal like where we've just been. The hawthorn is there though its branches are barren, and the curves of the land, though they rise a little higher and dip a bit lower. The grass is so green, the soil so black and rich, they look like they might explode with color.

Twilight infuses the air—the kind of light that doesn't come from the sky. No sun, moon, or stars raise their weary heads here. No, the light emanates from the land. It never gets any brighter or darker than this. It makes for strange shadows,

flickerings behind stone and brush.

I don't feel any of it. Not the color. Not the beauty. My heart is as cold as the veil.

Thomas' complexion is worse than pasty. He can hardly hold his head up. There's no time to stop. No time to see to him.

We cross the river of all the blood shed on earth with its strong, coppery, nauseating scent, and the river of all the tears ever cried that washes us clean. We stop to rest and share bread and honey that someone has left for us in that spot, same as every other time before. I show Thomas the roads open to us. The wide road to hell. The narrow, thorny path of righteousness. The fair winding dirt road over the hills to Faery, which we take when we've had our fill of food.

Thomas sleeps most of the way. I don't mind his weight as he leans against me. Or at least I don't mind it much. By the time we come to the curve of the road where the fruit tree grows, the oak's branches laden with every kind of fruit, he's completely lucid. And starved. And aching with thirst.

He reaches for an apple; I stay his hand. "Not this tree. Never. One bite will kill you where you sit. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand any of this." He clears his dry throat. "I thought I was already dead."

"Wishful thinking," I say. "Seven years in my service. That's my price."

Thomas looks at me. "That was an expensive kiss, Lady."

"Not for the kiss, man." I'm tempted to box his ears. "For the knowledge, for

the gifts.”

“What if I don’t want any of that? What if I want to go back to sleeping under the tree and never have seen you, never kissed you. What do you think about that?”

“I think the earl would have caught up with you and fed you to his hounds.”

His brows V’ed into his hairline. “How do you know that?”

What a silly question. “You fell asleep.”

“No,” he says. “How do you know about the earl?”

“I tasted it in you.”

His jaw drops. With him struck momentarily speechless, it’s a good time to lay down some ground rules. “We’ll be home soon. There will be guards on the road. Don’t speak to them or anyone else. Not one word or you’ll never be able to go home. You’ll be trapped here.”

He recovers some composure. “You’ll let me go?”

“What would be the point of keeping you forever?”

He shakes his head. “What would be the point of taking me in the first place?”

He seems to have missed the part about the knowledge and the gifts. Funny. “You’re Thomas.”

“You could have found another Thomas, Lady.”

“What makes you think I haven’t?” I signal the horse onward.

Thomas stiffens. But gradually he settles back into the steady rhythm of the horse’s gait. “You should know that I’m not very good at doing what I’m supposed to.”

I could smell the sentries already. I pulled Thomas closer to me. “Just like your predecessors.”

“What happened to them?”

A good question, and one I have no intention of answering.

Nearly the whole lot of them died here. I tasted them until they had nothing left. No flesh. No marrow in their bones. To be entirely truthful, I ate them. No point in telling him that.

The first Thomas, though—he’d been something special. I’d taken him in, taught him, and sent him back out into his human world to work my magic. He should have come back to me.

We round a curve in the road. Happen upon the first of the guards. She’s a good two feet taller than I, armored in stone plate she shouldn’t have been able to walk in. But she can, and she does, and she carries a stone sword to boot. She eyes Thomas like the potential threat he is.

We pass two more outfitted like her on the way to the hill fort as the road grows hemmed in with holly and nettle, tall enough that only a giant might see over them. They grow taller and taller until the winding track ends and both

walls of green meet at an arch in the middle. A gate of woven ivy hangs there on oak hinges—a treacherous enemy all on its own for the trespasser. It has no compunction about tangling the unwary. Or eating them.

The last of the guards stands watch before it. He helps me from the horse but leaves Thomas to dismount on his own. Thomas would have slid off, and I would have caught him on the way down, but the horse bucks him off in one fluid rise. He hits the dirt like a spineless thing with an oomph,! having lost all the air in his lungs to the fall.

I scoop him up myself and glare at the horse, whose hooves sprout fingers and toes and molt to hands and feet. His legs shorten and he shifts to become man-shaped, sharp muscle and hard, flat planes in all the right places. His golden brown hair brushes his shoulders. He shakes it out, his long nose and mouth shrinking. Those blue eyes don’t change at all.

He stands there in all his naked glory. And glory is the perfect word. He grins, but the gesture doesn’t touch his eyes. The only thing I read there is concern for me.

Not that I don’t appreciate it. He’s my husband after all, and as long as we’ve been together, we both know how many layers of love have been built upon the fiery crush of first courtship.

Fiercely independent, both of us.

Lovers? We’ve both taken many. It never changed what we had. Not until Thomas. The first one. The one who froze my heart.

“You could have a little more gentle,” I say.

The king folds his arms across his chest. “Why? They’re never gentle with you.”

“This one could be different.”

“Not likely,” my husband says. “But even if he is, he won’t be the one who never returned. He won’t be that Thomas.”

I walked right into that one. I’m not sure I deserve it, though. It cuts that maybe he lied to me. It cuts worse that he might’ve forgotten me.

“The veil is thickening,” he says. “And that’s accelerating. We don’t have much time.”

“Then I’d better take him inside.” I maneuver better purchase and leverage for his passed-out dead weight. The gate parts for me. I march my human charge through it and through the side of the hill behind it.

Through the shored-up fecund earth of the opening passage, into the widening cavern built larger than the hill itself. Where dimensions fold in on each other and make room for the impossible. Where magic reigns.

Past the warriors and craftsmen and the handful of children gathered in the halls awaiting my return, who watch our progress without looking too closely at either of us.

Down the corridor and to the left before the hall and the thrones, to my own chambers. The oak doors part as I need them to—just before I enter, step onto the patchwork of rugs laid across the stone floor. They crunch underfoot like the rainbow of fallen leaves woven into them. Birch and oak and yew. And hawthorn.

My women have left the rooms as I instructed: a bowl of fresh water, with soap and cloths for washing, on the small table near the entry; sun-and-wind dried sheets and the softest wool blanket on the bed; a pillow on the sitting chair and books of lore—of stories not yet known in the human world—piled at its feet.

I rest Thomas on the bed and wipe his face as best I can before I leave him for a couple of hours—maybe more than I can spare. But he's no good to me right now.

Meanwhile, there's food that doesn't nourish me and drink that does not sate, and a tall tale from the huntsmen who felled the boar upon which we feast. And then there is as much warmth as my king and I can muster, and even that doesn't touch deep enough.

I fall asleep in his arms. Only to be rudely shaken awake a few minutes later.

"I've been calling your name for five minutes," my husband says.

Thomas has attempted escape.

My husband has had him returned to my chambers. He leads me there through the empty, echoing corridor. Although it seems obvious, I have to ask. "You set watch on him?"

"He's a stranger. He tried to swim across the lake."

The king nods as if he knows exactly the moment the thought enters my mind: There are things in the lake. Things with teeth sharper than mine. I can't keep the incredulity out of my tone. "You're joking."

“You gave him the speech about the guards along the road, didn’t you? Why would he bother to go that way?”

I cover my eyes with my hands. “Is he still in one piece?”

“The watch fished him out before too much damage was done.” With a sad smile, he leaves me to open the door.

Before I can cross the threshold, one of my own books strikes me square in the forehead. A hail of books! On my arms, my chest, my hip.

Thomas crouches in the corner beside the chair. He doesn’t miss once—not even though I’m a moving target. But the closer I get, the less time he has to rearm.

I capture his wrists, and he moves to kick me.

“Be careful.” A warning he’d do best to heed.

“Or what—you’ll kill me?”

Fire snaps in his eyes. If I’d been human, I’d have keeled over dead from the force of his defiance. Of his anger.

I’ve never been human.

“You’re not afraid of death, are you, Thomas?”

“Not unless it’s long and slow.”

I pluck the nearest bit of ammunition off the floor. It's *Finvara's Wars*. A fascinating bit of history. Essential as breathing. "Don't you want to read this? Don't you want to know the stories? What kind of bard are you?"

"The kind who prefers the open road to a cage."

I take a deep breath. "This is the way it's always been. I kiss you, and you come away with me. I teach you. The stories of my people."

He loses the tension in his arms. A signal for me to let go. I do, and to his good fortune, I don't bare my teeth.

"Why?"

"Knowledge is power."

"Not good enough."

"A bard would say such a thing?"

"My bardic credentials aside, Lady, what's the real reason?" He massages his wrists where I'd held them.

"What do you do for a living?" I ask. "What's your job in this life?"

"To make people laugh. To make them cry. And to seduce their wives and daughters." That last is meant to break the tension, but it's woefully inadequate.

"You educate the people."

He shakes his head. “I entertain them.”

“Those purposes are not necessarily a breed apart.”

“I’ll give you that.”

“We have history. Stories. We’ve more than we’ve had time or chance to send into your world. And, anytime now, sending them will become impossible. Just as our walking in your world will become impossible.”

He mulls over my words. “You brought me here to learn the stories. To remember you. That’s the service you would bind me to?”

“Yes.” Although I wished for more. For the other Thomas. The first one.

“There’s no way I could read all this—learn all this—in the kind of time you’re talking about.”

“We had to try.”

“There is no seven years, is there?” he asks. “That’s just a number you made up.”

I meet his gaze. “No. It’s tradition.”

“So you’ll let me go.” A statement of fact, not a question.

“Yes.”

His eyes soften, but I know it’s only half-meant. He doesn’t trust me. I’m not sure I would, were I in his shoes. “You would have had me fall in love with you.”

I school my expression. Let him see what I want him to. “What do you mean?”

“Under the tree, when we kissed.”

“You had to kiss me before I could bring you here. That’s the way it’s always been.”

“But you felt something,” he says. “You said you saw things—you tasted them in me.”

“Yes.” The memory of it would make me shudder if I allowed it to.

“But you didn’t let me taste anything of you.”

I raise a brow at that.

“I think you know what I mean, Lady.”

Of course I do. I dissemble sometimes, but I never lie. “What do you want?”

I expect him to say he wants the taste—he wants my secrets, my essence—everything given to him. I expect him to demand it. Turnabout is fair play, and I’m the one in need. I’m the one who’s dying to his world. The one who will be forgotten.

He takes my hand. The way he'd done before, beneath the tree. He closes his eyes and breathes deep, as if he's mustering courage. When he opens them again, I see what I did when I tasted him, when he made me feel: his love of the other mortals met on the road. The love that sustains him. What makes him who he is. What I might have taken from him by bringing him here.

This doesn't feel half-meant. It feels whole. And impossible, that he could find such love for me. It has to be magic. A sorcery of his own.

He's more than I bargained for.

"If there's any story I'm interested in taking back with me, it's yours," he says.

Of all the things and all the ways he could have said them, this one touches me. I don't know how. "There's too much to know. You can't take it all into yourself."

"I have a good memory," he says.

Maybe so. "I've been alive for millennia."

He strokes my hand. "Then tell me a story. Tell me one you want me to tell. One that you would want to be remembered by."

There's only one I would choose.

I kiss him again, this man who is not like the others. This man, who is not the first and who will not return to me because there will be no way back. This man who loves me.

I give him the first sight of the other one, asleep under the hawthorn. First kiss and all the ripe tastes of that mouth. Time and memory.

I give him the first harrowing ride across the River of Blood and the River of Tears and the first sight of the fort gate with my beloved human in my arms. I give him all the nights we spend together, the way our bodies meld until we are one—neither human nor Fae, but something else. Something new.

I give him the sending away at the edge of my world, a bite of the apple picked fresh from the forbidden tree.

And the gifts: the true-speech, so that nary a false word may cross his tongue. And the prophecy, so that he may see others' future. And his own.

With that kiss I send him forth by my sorcery, on the wind of my breath. I send him forth on my desire. I navigate the cracks in the ice, the thinning way, and see him safely on the other side.

I leave him not under the tree but on the road, with his harp slung over his shoulder, none the worse for wear for having lain in the dew.

He manages a handful of words before I pull back into my own world, into my own eternal life. "I will remember. I promise."

Will he keep that faith? Henceforth, he may dissemble, but he will never lie. And so I hold him in my service—at least for the next seven years.

If time runs differently here—and, oh, it does—seven years may last him the rest of his life.

I know it when the veil closes; I lose all sense of him. The freeze is total. Complete.

And then the most curious thing happens—to my surprise, my own heart cracks. Not wide open. But enough for me to realize what I hold in my own two hands.

I feel.

Color and beauty and wonder never found in a mortal world, never found asleep beneath any tree.

My husband calls for me. My thawing heart hears him.

And I answer him, smiling at last.

BAND OF SISTERS

Allan Rousselle

Allen Rousselle began taking college level math classes and computer classes at the age of 12. He earned his BA in two majors (History and Russian & Soviet Studies) at Cornell University and his master's in Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He attended Clarion West Writers Workshop, plus various Oregon Coast Writers Workshops, while learning his craft. Though he is well published in nonfiction (he sold his first piece in 1984), this is his first published fiction.

Here's why the band broke up.

We had a good run, my fellow Sirens and I, but we started to get on each other's nerves after a few hundred years, and our hearts just weren't in the music any longer. It helped that Aphrodite let us out of our contract.

We had started out as a barn band on the rolling hills just outside of Athens, where Alexandra's family ran a sheep farm with over four hundred head. She and Moira and I knew each other from temple, where our families went into town to pay their respects to Hera, and we met our soprano, Big Lou, during a sit-in to protest the war with Corinth.

The sit-in failed, of course. This was Athens before the heyday of democracy, don't forget, which means that nobody paid attention to girls. They didn't pay attention to girls during the height of democracy, either, but that didn't make our pre-democratic system any more fair.

When we weren’t busy helping our mothers tend the flocks, cook the meals, mend the clothes, and raise our younger siblings, the four of us would get together in a stable at Alexandra’s and practice our singing.

We must have been quite a sight, the gangly, prepubescent four of us with our long dark hair flowing back over our undyed summer chitons, laughing and singing among the hay-strewn stalls beneath a straw-thatched roof. Each of us a different height, but each of us with rigid posture. Big Lou, the first of us to develop breasts, was still just Little Lucina at the time.

Moira was the prettiest of us, with a perfectly straight nose and large brown eyes, and also the most serious about the music. She taught us melodies and how to harmonize. She had a natural sense of rhythm and a perfect sense of pitch. She taught us to breathe in the hay-and wool-scented air deeply between verses, to listen to each other as we blended our voices together.

Before long, we started singing on errands to the market. We sang before and after services at temple. Our parents paid us no mind, but others began to notice. Parents and children alike would laugh and croon along and even shout out requests for songs they’d heard us perform before.

As we grew into women, our voices took on deeper, richer tones, which made our singing all the more enjoyable. Our breasts filled in and our hips widened, which made the boys start to look at us strangely. We started to bleed, which frightened us and fascinated us at the same time.

Our mothers began talking to us about marriage.

Our fathers stopped talking to us altogether.

We worried that the four of us would soon be married off to other families, in

dowered trades much like the sheep and wool our fathers specialized in raising. Alexandra and Big Lou prayed to Hera that this wouldn't come to pass.

But one overcast day at the stables, Moira reported to us that she'd overheard her parents' plans for her wedding. The deal was already arranged.

The news devastated me but, at the same time, I was curious. What would marriage be like? What would it be like to lie with a man? I didn't want the four of us to lose our friendship but, well, I began to accept it as inevitable.

It's funny how, as a group, you can sometimes find the courage and even the audacity to do things that you would never dream of doing on your own.

On the pretext of running errands, the four of us walked the gravelly dirt road into town, past the mud brick homes with the thatched roofs and toward the temple of Aphrodite. If Hera wouldn't help us, perhaps her adversary would.

In the middle of the open-air structure, with its angular stone columns and animal-offering altar, the four of us stood alone. Moira spoke for all of us:

"Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, must we be married off like chattel?"

"And what would you prefer?"

Her golden voice startled us. We whirled around to see the most beautiful woman in the world, adorned in silken white robes and radiating a shimmering light around her perfect, delicate features.

"To keep singing," said Moira.

“To stay together,” said Alexandra.

“To not be forced into marriage,” said I.

“To stop this senseless war with Corinth!”

The three of us looked at Big Lou.

“What?” she asked.

But Aphrodite simply nodded. “I have been waiting for you. I can grant you what you wish. Simply go down to the harbor and seek out the ship named for Hermes. Offer the captain a song in exchange for passage to the Isle of Melios.”

We were young. We were foolish. We didn’t understand at the time that the gods do not do favors for mortals. Rather, they use mortals as pawns in their own games.

In short, we were set up.

The four of us went directly to the wide harbor, where we found a tender to the *Hermes*. The pilot of the small wooden rowboat seemed to hang on Moira’s every word when she asked that we be taken to the thirty-oar warship. While he rowed, Big Lou softly sang a ballad that I didn’t recall hearing before but that was nonetheless familiar. The pilot drank up on every note.

Once aboard the *Hermes*, the captain there, too, seemed mildly intoxicated just to hear us speak. Alexandra offered to sing for the crew while they took us to Melios.

“It would be our pleasure to conduct you, as that is halfway between here and Corinth.” The captain’s voice sounded lost in a dream.

For an instant, my mind felt as floaty and insecure as the deck of the ship we stood upon. Something was definitely rotten in Athens harbor. But then the crew completed preparations and manned the oars. The girls and I began singing a traditional sea shanty that we’d all learned years ago, and the men rowed to the pace of our song.

There is a feeling you get, as a singer, when you settle into a groove. It’s like tapping into some spiritual flow, and the words and the notes just pour out effortlessly. You lose yourself in the music.

All four of us tapped into that flow right there on the front deck of the *Hermes,* and the music simply carried us away on its own tide. I realized at some point that we were singing words we’d never learned, in perfect harmony to tunes we’d never heard before. Something about a boogie woogie bugle boy. A Chattanooga choo-choo. Whatever any of that meant.

We lost ourselves in the music, and so did the rowers. The rowers, keeping perfect time as they pulled in unison at their long wooden handles. Most of them shirtless, their muscles strained under the sweat and the grime and the unforgiving sun. I’d be lying if I said I found the scenery unpleasant.

The captain, too, lost himself in the music, although he remained in his billowy tunic.

And then the deck jumped out from below our feet as terrible crashing, grinding, grating noises racked through the ship. Heavy lumber snapped like twigs as the *Hermes* collided with rocks. I fell back onto the tilting deck. I crashed into water and foam.

I blacked out.

By the time I woke up, the light had grown dusky. I lay in the wet sand of a beach, my head aching as though it had caught fire and then been beaten with a stick. As I struggled to my feet, my sister singers were likewise reviving on the shore.

Around us lay the dead bodies of thirty sailors. And one captain.

Crates washed up among the debris and the bodies, as well. Crates of lamb jerky and salt pork, kegs of ale and pickled fruits. Boxes of leather and cloth and metal shields and swords. Many of the crates were smashed open among the wreckage, but it turned out that plenty of provisions survived.

We sang a hymn for the dead.

When it was over, Moira started to raise her arms, then let them drop by her sides. “Well,” she said, “we’re still singing.”

Alexandra nodded. “And we’re still together.”

I looked around the corpse-strew sand. “We’re certainly not being forced into marriage.”

“And we might be stopping the war with Corinth.”

We all looked at Big Lou.

“Think about it. These were soldiers. Heading for Corinth.”

After a beat, the three of us realized what she meant. “Ohhh,” we said in unison.

I don’t want to make it sound as though we were cavalier about all of those men who died. It’s true that we eventually did become aloof about the men we lured to their demise, but that came later. That was a coping mechanism. At this point, I think our behavior simply resulted from shock.

Which, I suppose, is another kind of coping mechanism.

But as terrible as it was to have all of these sailors scattered about on the shore, we had to start dealing with the reality that we were alive, and there was nothing we could do for the dead. So we sorted through the crates, we assembled crude shelters from what we could salvage from the wreck, and we searched the island to see if anyone else lived there.

Melios, if that was indeed where we had landed, was several miles around, with narrow but treacherous channels between it and neighboring islands on three sides. On the fourth side, where we had washed ashore, there was nothing but smooth sea on the other side of the boulders that guarded the beach.

The island was inhabited only by wild olive trees and carob trees, by ferns and brush and grass. A large hill dominated the center of the island and gave us an excellent vantage point to look for coming ships.

Over the coming weeks, we ate well. We drank well. We fashioned new clothes for ourselves. And we sang.

Oh my, we sang. We sang ancient songs and current songs and songs that wouldn’t be written for hundreds or even thousands of years. We sang shanties and dirges, folksongs and gospel, blues and bluegrass. Gregorian chants and rock and roll. Zulu war cries and Lakota rain prayers.

When we saw a ship sailing toward us from the North, we went down to the beach and sang to them. Perhaps these kind souls from Corinth would be generous enough to rescue us from the island.

But, no. They crashed into the rocks, and more bodies and provisions washed up on the shore. We took the provisions. We left the bodies.

Freshly dead bodies start to stink before too long. You can imagine why we choose to live on the hill, where the wind protected us from the smell. But it also didn't take long for the sea to claim its own, leaving nothing but a pile of bones on the beach.

For decades, whenever we saw a ship, we thought of rescue from the island. We would sing to them and run down to the shore to greet them, standing amidst the skeletons of their predecessors. Inevitably, they would only contribute more provisions and more bodies.

There were a few occasions where sailors actually survived the wreck. They would stumble up the beach, entranced in our song. Eventually, one of us would work up the nerve to take such a man and to lie with him there on the beach. But while the sailor submitted physically, he remained lost in our song. Nothing we did ever changed that. Eventually, he would waste away, and perish like his comrades.

Over the years, we lost hope of rescue. We came to terms with our enchantment. By granting our wish, Aphrodite was using us as a tool to curse the sailors who passed by. And as such, we came to feel that we were cursed, too.

Many years had passed, and life continued on this way. We did not age, we did not want for food or shelter, but nor could we get close to men without destroying them. While we had resisted being chattel, we did not desire to be

exiles, either, isolated by our talents. By our power.

Then one day came a ship called the Argo. We saw it, we sang to it, and we drew it in. But just as the ship approached, we heard another song coming from the South. A different song. It overpowered ours, and the Argo continued on its way, uninjured.

None of us were quite sure what to make of that.

“Perhaps this means we should be happy, because that means change is possible,” said Alexandra.

“Perhaps we should be worried because our power can be overcome,” said Moira.

“Perhaps this means nothing. This may have been merely an aberration,” said I.

“Perhaps the war between Athens and Corinth is over.”

We pretended not to hear Big Lou.

But we all thought about the *Argo*. We prayed to Aphrodite, to ask her what this sign meant. Aphrodite didn’t answer. But occasionally, another ship would come buy, and we would sing to it, and we would once again be replenished in provisions and in bones.

Years later, there came another ship. As always, we sang to it. But this time, something even more peculiar occurred. It sailed near to us, but it never seemed to change course. None of the men on the ship seemed to hear us, except for one.

One man, who was tied fast to the main mast. He looked at us. He strained to break his bonds, to come join us. But his bonds held, and his ship sailed safely past.

They knew about us. Somehow, they knew. And had prepared. And yet, that one man chose to hear us.

“They can’t keep him tied up forever,” said Moira. “And when they cut him loose, he’ll swim for us.”

But he didn’t. He never came back.

“He’s too far away to hear our song, and we no longer have any power over him,” said Alexandra.

“That implies our song only has power when they can still hear it,” said I.

“But then, doesn’t that mean that if a sailor survives long enough to reach our shores, he doesn’t have to perish?”

The three of us stared at Big Lou, dumbfounded.

“Don’t you see?” she continued, “We can choose to stop singing.”

The three of us had no answer to that.

Before long, another ship had passed by, and we stood among the bones on the shore, and we sang to the ship. And as in decades past, it crashed into the rocks before us.

One man survived. A fine looking sailor with broad, muscular shoulders and a proud, clean-shaven face.

On this particular occasion, it was Alexandra who went to the man and chose to lie with him on the beach. And when she was through with him, she stopped her singing. She was quiet. He asked her to resume, but she resisted. Moira, Big Lou, and I fell silent, as well, and waited to see what would happen next.

“Please?” he asked.

Alexandra shook her head.

Then the man looked around for food, and she led him to it. Instead of wasting away, the man regained himself. During the several days that followed, he recovered his strength.

It was strange for me, those several days, not singing at all. But we were all fascinated to see what would happen next.

Alexandra whispered to the man, “Build me a boat.”

And he did. It took him several days, but he found what he needed and fashioned a small rowboat.

Then Alexandra said to us, “I’m leaving.”

“But what about us?” Moira’s eyes were wide with panic.

“You can still sing.”

“But they’ll force you into marriage!” My own panic worried its way around my throat.

“No, but I can choose to marry.”

“Aphrodite won’t let you leave,” said Big Lou, but her voice didn’t sound so certain.

Alexandra put her hand on Big Lou’s shoulder. “Aphrodite gave us the power, but we accepted the gift. We don’t have to use it all the time. And we don’t have to give it up, either.”

With that, she turned away and took her man’s arm, and they walked down to the shore where his new boat was ready to launch. I’ve never seen Alexandra since then.

It’s too easy, I think, to blame the break-up of our band on the man. Moira, Alexandra, Big Lou, and I had been together for a long time, and we were ready to grow in different directions.

Moira and I eventually left the island. We each went our separate ways once we returned to Athens, which had become a very different place from when we’d left. The temples had fallen into disrepair, and a man named Socrates delicately questioned whether the gods even existed. He seemed like somebody I should go meet. Big Lou stayed behind, ever vigilant against any warships traveling between Athens and Corinth.

It takes getting used to, wielding your power like a scalpel instead of like a sledgehammer. But it provides you with a great many more options.

Which is why I plan to keep singing—in one way or another—for a long, long time.

MOTHER OF MONSTERS

Greg Beatty

Greg Beatty has published more than a hundred short stories across a wide range of genres. He’s got a doctorate in English, but he swears that it doesn’t mess with his ability to write. His fascination with classical mythology was a starting point for this story.

“ Name?”

“Echidna.”

Startled by the pure tones and unfamiliar name, Minos let the stylus fall from his weary fingers. He looked up to see who’d arrived in Hades. What he saw made him forget he was dead for a moment. He leaned forward for a better look at the woman newly debarked from Charon’s galley. She stood tall and proud, her face as lovely as a goddess and as full of majesty too, a temple statue lit from within.

Souls crowded round her, the dead flowing to her like moths to a cook fire. Such a cluster of the dead cast a gray light upon Hades, so Minos could clearly see the great stone caverns and spiny out croppings normally filled with shadow. They weren’t any prettier by soul-light. Minos sighed as he picked up his stylus once more, ready to search for this beauty’s name among the lists of the unfortunate dead.

“I’m sorry. Would you repeat your name?”

“Echidna.”

Minos ran his finger over the immense tablet that listed the names of the dead —a slab of clay the size of the underside of the earth—then shook his head.

“A final time, most high and gracious one?”

The ghostly horde whispered. Hades only adopted such a respectful tone when he suspected the suppliant of being a god in disguise.

“Echidna.” The ugly name fell again from her lovely lips.

Minos searched his tablet. Charon came and went, unloading boatloads of the newly dead. Finally Echidna said, “If that’s a list of humans, you won’t find me. Try ‘monsters.’ ”

Minos glanced up. Echidna’s torso twisted in response. Minos gasped. She was as hideous below the waist as she was divinely beautiful above it. Below her girdle Echidna was all snake, continually curling with unquiet motion.

At his stare, her voice grew bitter. “I better be on that list. They call me the mother of monsters, after all. Called, I guess.”

Minos switched tablets. “Ah. Here it is. Oh my. Echidna. You gave birth to the Chimera—and the Hydra!” He sneered at her with more than the average Greek’s contempt for women, lust forgotten.

“That’s not all,” Echidna said. “How are you doing, son?”

Cerberus answered his mother with three soul-chilling barks. The crowding spirits rustled. The three-headed dog of hell . . . other?

Minos raised his stylus to slash at her name, muttering, “I thought you were immortal.”

“No, just long-lived, and so as vulnerable to pain as anyone here.” Echidna rippled her lower portions into the river Styx, splashing the dead with forgetfulness. “So tell me my fate and be done with it.”

“There is a problem,” Minos said.

“I’m dead. That’s not problem enough?”

Minos shook his head. “Sadly, no. Look about you.”

Echidna did. She saw darkness and those who dealt in darkness. She saw the souls of the petty and the souls of the great, all equal in the land of eternal shade. She saw those who had known glory trying to seep through the cracks in the earth, and her son driving them back with fang and claw.

“I see death.”

“You see, but you do not see. This is a place for dead humans, humans and only three others. There is my lord Hades, the deathless one whose name graces this realm. There are the few among the dead who have some special place, like myself. And there are those like your dogboy Cerberus, who torment the dead.”

Speaking gently for the first time, Minos said, “You are none of those.”

“What!”

“Monsters have no souls and thus no place among the dead.”

Echidna cocked her head, tasting the air. “But—my children? Chimera, who played so wonderfully when he was young? You should have seen him catch his serpent’s tail with his lion’s mouth!”

Minos crumbled a piece of the ever-expanding tablet in his hands. “Dust. When he breathed his last, his body fell to dust.”

A catch in her voice, Echidna said, “The Hydra?”

Minos did not need to consult his tablet. “His bones are stones of the earth, broken and forgotten.”

Weeping now, Echidna asked, “And little Cauke?”

Minos consulted one of the hovering dead for this name. After the dim soul whispered, Minos said, “Ah, him too? That’s too bad.”

Speaking more loudly, Minos said, “The eagle who ate the liver of Prometheus was killed by a hunter after Heracles freed the fire-giving Titan. He became a meal for the man’s dogs.”

“Enough!” Echidna tried to throw herself into the river Styx, but her serpent half and her nymph half fought one another. Echidna never submerged herself enough to forget.

Minos clapped his hands. “Sad, yes, but I must say farewell.”

He slashed at the tablet, but he could not mark it. “That’s . . . not common.” He tried again.

“My children lie with the dust and stones, I cannot forget my pain, and you cannot even assign me to Hell properly?”

Minos winced. “A quick line through your name and your bones should be lining the river, so humans can climb your spine like stadium steps and stand before me more easily. But something here is beyond me.”

Minos braced his dead and weary shoulders. “My lord?”

In an instant, divine Hades, ruler of the dark realm, stood before his servant. His countenance shown with night. The gathered spirits looked away. Minos kept just enough composure to gesture at the tablet, then he too averted his eyes. Only Echidna, whose eyes were already dark with dreams of children fallen to dust, could face Hades. His voice rattled the rocks. “Echidna, mother of monsters.”

“So men called me.”

“We have a problem.”

“You have a problem, lord Hades. I am dead and my one living child serves you.”

“He serve me well,” Hades boomed. “Cerberus is a good dog. But yes, we have a problem. By all that has been known, you should be dust now. However, some fate beyond my powers holds you together. Therefore, we will have a judgment.”

“You will judge me—more?” Echidna’s serpent half lashed her frustration.

“Not I, and not Minos. Instead, we will choose three shades by lot. They will judge you. All that they have left is the fact that they were humans and have

souls. Are souls. They will each ask you one question, and I will weigh your words."

Hades waved his hands, casting a finger bone onto the cold earth.

"Kalikes of Sparta."

Souls pressed close, blending like waves upon the beach. At last they parted, and one came forward. Kalikes was indistinguishable from the rest, but he was a soul, and so privileged to draw close and whisper to his deathless lord.

Hades repeated his question so everyone could hear. "You are both woman and serpent, beauty and temptation all in one. Did you ever know love?"

Echidna recoiled. "This is the question I must answer in front of all the dead?"

Hades nodded. "The ability to love is one mark of having a soul. My lady Persephone taught me that. And to be honest, I too am curious."

"You've seen me cry for my children. Is that not answer enough?" Echidna asked. "No? I see. Even in death Kalikes remains but a man and thinks of love for a man, not of a mother for her child. Alright then. My heart can get no barer. Yes. I loved a man."

Kalikes rippled; Hades translated that which Echidna already understood. "More. You must say more. You must say how."

Echidna hissed. "Very well."

"You must know the fate women suffer at the hands of men and gods alike. We are desired and cursed. They want us more than words can say, more than

the weak reed of reason can stand, until lust becomes a madness upon their flesh. They say even Zeus fears desire, for it can lead him astray; and in truth, has he not been a cow, a swan, a golden rain, all to know the tender flesh of maidens?"

"And you are no better, death god. Your lust for Demeter's daughter brought rape upon the earth. It costs men six months of mourning every year, which they call winter."

"I am not on trial here," Hades said with dead tongue.

"But you are. So are all men, for they love the eyes, the lips, the sunlit parts of women, but they fear us below the waist. I am no more monstrous than any shade who walked the earth in women's garb, save that my form is openly dark. Because men fear our power, they imprison us, or, in my case, drive me out to live in a cave, far from Greece. They wanted me, but they feared me so much so that none approached me."

"Then where did all of these twisted children come from?" Hades asked. "And how did you love?"

Echidna laughed. "When men will not love women, monsters take them, violently and in the night. Most of my children were fathered by Typhoeus."

Echidna shook her head. The motion threw her coils forward into the gray-green light. The dead swarmed close, drawn by scars so numerous that they piled one atop another like the dead. A sibilant whisper moved through Hades.

Its king spoke more gently. "You loved a dragon?"

Echidna shook her head, drawing old pain back into shadow. "Typhoeus came to me time and again, taking me by force. I mistook his slashing desire for love. For a while. I didn't know true love until a hero came to me. A powerful, upright man. Heracles."

“You loved Heracles, even though he killed your children?”

Echidna nodded with her entire length. “It was not easy, and I did not expect it, but yes. He came to me on one of his many quests. I took him for another man who would see my face and smile, then see the power coiled below my girdle and spit.”

As she remembered, Echida twisted to private music. Each turn caressed the air, making her snake half more attractive than her merely human half, for a curving instant. “But Herc was different. He wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t wise, or even all that bright, but he wasn’t afraid. Actually, he liked my strength. Years before, when maddened by wine, Heracles had killed his wife and children. He was relieved that he would never have to fear killing me.”

Echidna did not notice three shades rise up at this, nor Hades gesture them back. “He was so guilty, years later, and so gentle in his strength. I came to love him deeply. And he had not known they were my children when he killed the Hydra and the Nemean lion, and if he had, well, he was a hero. That’s what heroes do. Besides,” Echidna said with an arch smile, “sometimes a girl likes to be able to tighten her coils without fear of crushing a man. Is—is Heracles here?” For a moment there was hope.

Hades shook his head.

“Where is he?”

Hades said, “You are not here to ask questions, mother of monsters, but to answer them. You have answered one well. Let me cast again.”

The bones were rolled. Hades called, “Argos Panopticus.”

The spirit that rose still bore the hundred eyes that had given him his name among the live: Argos the all-seeing.

“My lord!” Echidna said. “This man killed me. That toss cannot be random.”

Hades shrugged. “The bones fall where the fates guide them. If they choose your killer, it is not my doing. I swear by my undying essence.”

Argos fluttered close, and Hades repeated his question for the listening dead. “We all have fates that are given us by the gods. I know, for I was yours. My question is, how do you accept the fate given you?”

Echidna bowed her head, muttering her answer into the dead ground. “Though I was exiled from the haunts of men very young, sent to slither forth before I had grown breasts, I know what the answer should be for any person of pious soul. It should be to accept the fates that the gods have given us all, great and small, with a willing heart and gratitude.”

Echidna’s tail flicked back and forth. “And I tried. I caught goats and badgers and offered their bones to the gods. I burned incense and thanked Artemis for the pain of childbirth every time another of my scaly brood clawed its bloody way into the world. Ask the gods. They will tell you how much I sacrificed, and how often.”

“And is that your answer, then?” Hades prompted when she paused.

Echidna reared up, balancing upon her tail and standing taller even than the lord of the dead himself. “No, it is not my answer!” Echidna spat, so angry that venom arched from her mouth to sizzle on the floor of Hades. “I hated my fate, and I cursed the gods who stitched me together so malformed. I cursed my fate waking, I cursed it in dreams, and I curse it now that I have a chance to address one of you undying bastards face to face. You want to know my fate? Look at my belly!

Hades had stepped back when Echidna reared, to distance himself from possible attack, but now he squinted at her flesh. The place where snake and nymph joined was marked by countless scars, places where knives, flints, and who knew what else had been dug in. “I hated what the gods made me. When I was alone, I would tear at myself, trying to be all snake or all woman, anything but what I was. Is this fair, I ask, Lord Hades?”

The gathered dead gave a mournful keen, ready for Hades to strike Echidna down. Instead, death smiled. “I have ruled the dead since time began. I know precisely how unfair the fates can be. Am I not as much a god as my brother Zeus, and yet consigned to rule here? Your honesty is a fresh wind in hell, and I welcome it. Yes, a soul is that which complains about its fate.”

Hades spread his arms as if to welcome Echidna to his realm, but Minos muttered. “My lord? You had given the fates three questions?”

Hades dropped his arms. “You see, oh brave one, how even the gods must serve the fates? Yes, there must be a third question.”

With that Hades tossed a third bone to the cold cavern floor. A waiting spirit joined it briefly, rolling with it. Hades seemed not to notice, and he read the cast’s result. “Odysseus.”

Already waiting, Odysseus fed his question to Hades. “All those who are alive know that they will die. The stature of their soul is determined by the legacy that they leave the world. What legacy do you leave behind you, oh Echidna?”

Echidna looked away from death then, peering into the realm of memory and pained by what she saw. Caution had quieted her voice before. Pain slowed it now. “My legacy. What legacy could I have, living alone in a cave? I could not sing poems, for who would hear them and pass them on? I did not lead men, for I lived alone—and what kingdom would have me, since no one even allowed me

live among them? I had hoped for my children to be my legacy. That was before I came here and learned what pain really was. My children are dead. I have no legacy."

Emptiness is death's greatest weapon, and Hades slowly raised a cupped hand to hurl it at Echidna. The sad snake woman stood ready to receive it and fall to dust.

Suddenly, Odysseus's ghost flitted between them. He stretched and twirled, taking on a thousand shapes. Odysseus took on the shape of the Hydra—and Heracles, who fought it. He became the sphinx, and Oedipus, who slew her. He became a siren, and portrayed himself, grappling heroically with their seductive song. And Echidna understood.

"Wait! I know now."

Hades stayed his hand. "Go on."

"What is a man? No, what is a hero? What immortality may a man know after death? He has only his honor and his glory, those shining qualities that he wrests from the jaws of fate. He may do this through trade and travel, but there his honor depends upon the whims of the gods, and what winds they cause to blow."

"A man may earn honor through battle, but there the glory earned depends upon the quality of his cause, of his enemy, and of his death. Think of Agamemnon, who fought gloriously, only to desecrate Troy and die at the hands of his wife."

"But there is a third way."

"Go on," Hades prompted. Behind him, Odysseus bobbed up and down, as if cheering an athlete to the finish of a race.

“The third way,” Echidna said, looking away, seeing a thousand losses and, at last, a thousand reasons for them all, “the third way is through me. Through my children.”

“Through your children.”

“Look to your own gate, Lord Hades,” she said. “My son, with whom I am well pleased, guards the gateway to Hell faithfully. My other sons—the snake headed, the goat bodied, the winged, the multibod ied, the strong, the twisted—they guard other gates. For by killing them, heroes may enter completely into the realms of honor and glory.”

Echidna rose up on her tail, standing for one darkly shining moment taller than Hades himself. “Men have called me the mother of monsters, but I am, in truth, the mother of their glory. Through my pain men gain immortality.”

She stared down at him. “Is that enough? Does that gain me entrance to Hades?”

The massed dead began to cheer, yes, yes, let her join us, but Hades shook his massive head.

“No.”

“What!” Echidna’s coils began to collapse.

“No, Echidna, good gateway to glory. I grant the truth of your argument, but I cannot in good conscience welcome you to the cold comforts enjoyed in my realm by those with souls.”

Hades laughed, as if unfamiliar with the practice. “Instead, I offer you another resting place.”

He gestured, as if digging into the earth. Cerberus bounded forward to dig furiously into the floor of the realm. When he was done, sunlight, true sunlight flooded up into Hades and onto its king. “This is no place for you, Echidna,” he said again. “I must place you in the Blessed Isle.”

“The Blessed Isle,” Echidna repeated.

“Yes. Elysian Fields. The shining realm in the far west, where the heroic dead know rest and pleasure. Call it heaven, if you like, for it is a true reward.”

Echidna rippled to the edge of the new hole in the bottom of hell, her snake half and her human half at last in complete accord. She paused at the edge to look her wordless thanks back to Odysseus. This gave Cerberus time to lap clear her tears with three great rasps of his tongues. There in the heart of Hades, Echidna hugged her last living son. When it appeared that she would linger, even at the light-filled pull of the Blessed Isles, Hades gently said, “There will be those you know there too.”

Echidna looked into the tunnel her son’s strong paws had dug. There, at the farthest reach of her vision, stood Heracles, waving.

She gave her son a last hug, then muttered, “Even the entrance into heaven is not free from pain.” Echidna slithered slowly down the hole, her beautiful tail the last sight the watching spirits saw.

And then Echidna was gone from Hades forever.

The assembled dead shared a long sigh that made them remember when they had hearts, and then began to disperse. Minos walked slowly back to his post. He

lifted his stylus, which seemed much heavier for having been set down for a time. “Name?” he asked.

The waiting newly dead walked forward to be judged, and the business of Hades went on as it always had. Well, almost, for as Minos judged the dead, the lord of the realm could be seen approaching a spirit. “Odysseus. Is it possible that the greatest trickster the poets have ever known could have thwarted the fates even after his death and tampered with my last cast?”

Hades looked at Cerberus, who was filling in the hole through which his mother had left.

“Oh, never mind,” Hades said, sighing. “I’ll deal with the fates. If I punished you for this, my wife would never forgive me.”

The second smile Hell had known in many years crept across his face. “I know,” Hades said. “I’ll have to exile you too. Be gone!”

Odysseus fled through the last chinks in the earth, following Echidna’s snakey trail to the Isle of the Blessed, where she would, in death, get what she had so greatly missed while living. For a while, just a while, Hell knew both happiness and justice.

SISTERS OF THE BLADE

Loren L. Coleman

Loren L. Coleman is the author of over twenty novels, including *Blood of Wolves*, which lead the re-launch of fiction novels for the world of Conan, and *Sword of Sedition* for the MechW-arrior: Dark Age line. He also writes a great deal of short fiction for *http://www.battlecorps.com/* and is working on a new original novel. When he isn't writing, Loren Coleman coaches local sports and collects DVDs. He also holds a black belt in traditional Tae Kwon Do, which he considers mandatory for any father with a daughter. His personal website can be found at *http://www.rasqal.com/* .

The narrow stairwell wound up inside a corner tower of the old Roman fort, a passageway lit by fat-burning torches guttering in the draft and a thin fall of gray light from above. Morgana gathered her gray skirts in large handfuls, hiked up the ragged hem to take smooth-worn steps two at a time. Sweat burned in the corners of her eyes. Her leather boots, muddied and slick after slipping through the woods, making her mad dash for the postern gate, slapped against cold, hard stone.

The scent of smoke and old soot and blood chased her along.

A distant, heavy thumping echoed past her, around her, always pushing her forward until she lost the echo against the beating sound of her own heart. Racing out onto a landing and through an open door which gave onto the fort's battlements, she cast about for her friend, her sister.

Her betrayer.

“Niviane!”

The daughter of Lord Tristain stood off to one side at a narrow opening between crenels, looking out over the wide, still waters of Salish. Her back to the tower door. Leaning heavily against the old stonework as if her muscles were not able to hold her up any longer. Reddish-brown hair spread in loose, damp curls over narrow shoulders and plunged halfway down her back. Her dress was the same one Morgana recalled her wearing to Arthur’s coronation that magical night, so many years ago, when Niviane had turned heads and truly caught Merlin’s eye—with its yards of copper cloth and the seafoam bodice to bring out her eyes.

It was torn now, down one side, and mud-spattered. She had also lost a slipper, and the heel of a bare foot peaked out near the hem.

“You should not have come,” her sister said without looking back.

Many things should not have happened. But had.

“They came for me at the Isle!” Chest heaving as she caught back her breath, Morgana pulled sweaty tangles of long golden hair back from her face. The distant thumping continued to pound like a slow, swollen heartbeat. In the courtyard below, men shouted for timbers and strong backs. “Gwenyffyr reminded Hector that I had healed Mordred after Gloucester. They say I gave him a comely guise, a glamor as Merlin once did for Uther.”

“Did you?” *Now* Niviane sounded interested.

“As if Gwen ever needed such a reason to slip away with a man. And you know I would not, even if I could. But they *believe*.”

Foolish, to think such things. But with dark times bearing down on them, the

minds of men so often sought after an escape from reason. From responsibility.

Hadn't that been the foundation of their sisterhood, after all? Niviane's skills, Morgana's teachings, and Gwenyffyr's charms, all wrapped into one grand, golden tale. The *sword of kings*. And even if Morgana felt reservations then, using her studies in such a fashion, she'd not said a thing to her sisters, caught up in their arguments of service and duty to Britain, to Arthur and Camelot, and to themselves. She'd made her pact and done her part, and she had watched alongside the others as their stories took on a life of their own, sweeping the whole of the land.

As their series of small lies became legend.

Well, it was all coming home, the strength of those beliefs. Torches had been set to Morgana's gate. Her groundsmen and her apprentices murdered. She'd barely escaped the Isle of Glass with her life, fleeing in simple clothes. Finding out along the way that Arthur was already believed to have been taken to mystical Avalon, his body vanished off the battlefield at Camlann. Of Gwenyffyr's broken faith. Niviane's treason.

Now, here on the battlements, she looked out over a courtyard alive with squires and stablehands and very, very few knights left to Lord Tristain. A handful of young men not much more than boys leaned up against the doors of the main gate knowing the crossbeam—a thick piece of good oak still—would never hold. They set their shoulders against it, but they were thrown back several paces every time the crash of a battering trunk slammed against the gate from its other side.

A yell. A few cries. The boys scrambled back up to set themselves against the doors again while from atop the gate Niviane's father shouted encouragement to the defenders, railed curses at God and the fates and the treachery of Britain's people.

Niviane continued to stare out over her lake, its gray waters reflecting an overcast sky.

"What have we done, Niviane? Oh God, what have we wrought?"

But there was no answer from either, and Morgana stumbled around the side of the narrow tower to another of the battlement overlooks. To check the siege pressing forward against the castle's foregate.

At least ten knights stormed before the fortress's walls, riding back and forth on their tall destriers. They waved swords overhead and shouted through open visors. From this height Morgana recognized none of them, though the soldiery they commanded were the larger worry. No jousting. No challenge before God this day. A hundred men assaulted the gate; a score gave hands to the battering ram while others held up heavy shields to ward off dropped rocks and arrow shafts, or threw up ladders and hooks to devil Lord Tristain's few defenders on the battlements.

This was the sisters' service to Britain? How it must end?

Then a cold, trembling hand brushed against Morgana's neck. Clamped down loosely over her shoulder. "Not too much longer," Niviane promised.

Tears threatened, and Morgana had never been the one among them who let her emotions run away with her. She spun, shoved aside her sister's hand. "Do not! You betrayed me. Betrayed *us*. Niviane, it did not have to end like this."

Niviane was pale as fine clay, her cheeks bloodless and eyes red-rimmed from tears. She clasped her hand back against her bosom, holding it as if Morgana had injured her with a blow far more painful than any slap. Her eyes were a pale, pale green. Watery. Her face so calm it belied the last several weeks of flight and terror. Now, only resignation and a flicker of concern as she spied the dark

bloodstains smearing Morgana’s sleeves and the front of her woolen dress.

“You’re injured?”

She had forgotten the blood. Used to its earthy smell from her years stitching up wounds, and having seen so much this last week as she came across injured men in the forests, on the road. Her simple gray dress was soaked black in several places.

“Not I. A farmer’s son who followed Lord Wal lace. Who’s dream was to be one of Arthur’s knights. I found him in the woods beyond the ramparts. Held his hand while he died. What else was I to do, sister?”

“What else can any of us do?” Niviane asked. She turned and limped slowly back around the tower.

Morgana followed. As she had forever followed her sisters of the heart. Never the strongest among the three, but able to live her own life and learn what there was to learn. Black Morgana, they’d called her for her silent brooding and studies. Mor gan the Fey. No interest in wizards or kings, she had believed no one capable of turning such vile anger toward her as they had in recent days.

“We could help.”

“Help whom? Would they listen?”

Niviane’s voice was light, but it had lost its musical quality. Her siren’s call, which had lured so many men to this old fortress guarded by the Lord of the Lake. The song that ensnared Merlin, with its beauty as much as her insight into the ways of men and power. It had been Niviane’s gift, such sight. And her curse to be born a woman, lacking influence during this time of strong men.

In Merlin, Morgana knew, her sister had thought to find the man she felt to be a kindred spirit. His mad ramblings had not hidden his intellect. And so uninterested in earthly desires. But things changed, didn't they? Gwenyffyr had ensured that, never being content with being simply content.

Now Niviane cocked her head to one side, listening to the battering blows against the gate coming with greater force, greater speed.

"Camelot has fallen. Arthur should not have survived Camlann. You and your healing have only delayed the inevitable, sorceress sister."

Perhaps. But his last request was still her holy vow. And the death of any dream came hard, hard.

"Give me the sword, then." If Morgana thought it would help, falling to her knees, she would have done so. "Let us find a new champion. It is not too late to do our duty to Britain. To Arthur."

"It was *always* too late. Merlin was an impatient man, but we listened. And we let him decide for us, though we knew it could cost us all." She shuddered. "But never, never so much."

Thunder broke within the gray clouds overhead, among the thick, heavy clumps piling up like sodden wool batting. Its echo rolled across Lake Salish and shattered against the fortress' crumbling walls.

Morgana heard nothing but defeat in her sister's voice, and staved it off with raised hand and a desperate will. "The sword—"

"Was mine to give!" Niviane hugged herself with long slender hands bracing against bare arms. White, white skin which showed each bruise like a rotten blemish on a perfect, golden apple. "We agreed, the three of us. But Gwen broke

the pact, spreading her legs for Mordred to sheath his blade in her while Arthur fought at Salisbury. Then the harpy denounces Lancelot, to hide her guilt!"

"And you lock away Merlin in the crypts." Morgana turned Niviane back to her with a rough hand. She remembered Merlin as more than the wild man who had stumbled up to Salish one day, entranced by the Lady of the Lake. She knew him in his softer moments as a teacher, a mentor. A man who had so much to pass along, when he bothered less with kingmaking and affairs of the heart.

If only Gwenyffyr had left well enough alone. Dressing them all up for the coronation, whispering in certain ears, so certain she did her sisters a favor.

If only Merlin, in the end, had not been a man, with a man's needs, after all.

If only.

But, "Taking back the sword was not enough? Arthur lost all, so quickly." Morgana stared into Niviane's watery gaze. "What gave you the right to decide?"

"He *touched* me!" Niviane yelled back in shrill voice. "It was never enough for Merlin. My council. The sword of the tribune which my father held in trust for the other lords. He never valued us. Valued *me*. You!" She sneered, and the loathing was sudden but clear on her face. "You, perhaps, dear sister, with your potions and salves and lore."

Every charge a knife at her breast. Temptations she would not likely know again if Britain fell back to the fear and distrust running rampant before Arthur.

Before the three sisters conspired with Merlin to raise a king.

Morgana stalked forward, taking Niviane by the arms and shaking her hard. “The sword,” she yelled. “Give it to me.”

But Niviane collapsed, as if a puppet unstrung from its toggles. Sinking out of Morgana’s grasp, falling to her knees as she sagged up against the battlement stone, staring out once more at her lovely, calm lake. Morgana recognized the vacant look in her sister’s eyes for what it was.

Madness.

Niviane would lure no more men. Wizards, or kings. And Morgana left her there, her mind slipping away toward oblivion.

“Mine to give,” Niviane whispered softly. “Mine.”

The narrow path Morgana traveled dropped out of the woods and onto a muddy lane winding along through Hampstead Village. A place she knew well. Short, square houses crowding together shoulder-by-shoulder around a wide courtyard with a single well at its center. Thatched roofs broken only by covered smoke holes. A cobblestone path laid in along the edge of the lane for when the rains came and turned the street into a thick, soupy mire.

Always a friendly place. Always speaking well of their lady liege and her secluded life at the Isle of Glass.

Who recognized her apprentices, and the knights Arthur often sent to seek Morgana’s aide, her counsel. Her service to Britain.

Always the benefit of her generous rewards.

Now, however, a quiet, forbidding presence loomed above and around her. Windows shuttered against the day when it was neither freezing or raining, merely overcast, with a light breeze blowing down out of the hills. No women gossiping around the well, drawing water for laundry or a late evening meal. No children playing or men riding through on their way to a hunt, to sport, or—most lately—to war.

Everything about Hampstead screamed at Morgana, who drifted back into the thin cover of some nearby trees. Something wrong. Something far, far out of place. Mocking her presence with a cold, empty silence.

A trap.

They knew. News had traveled faster than she could, with her mare pulled up lame.

News from the convent at Caerleon.

Tales from the fall of Salish.

Morgana had seen Lord Tristain's gates finally give way. Had been inside still, hiding among the shadows near the postern gate, waiting until two knights who guarded the outside were let in by a squire of Sir Calvin. Close enough to smell their sweat. To hear how their armor rubbed hard at the joints, slapped against well-muscled thighs.

Watched as they drew swords and rushed forward into the courtyard to find the Lord of the Lake or the daughter whose honor he fought to protect.

Racing for the woods, Morgana quickly lost the pair of squires who'd seen

and chased after her. Slipping along muddied trails and ducking behind a heavy screen of perfumed wisteria as the men-at-arms hurried past, she then doubled back and took herself up a rocky trail along the lake's shore.

She knew the hidden paths around the old fort as well as any local youth might, having spent so many years in Niviane's company. Two young girls pretending to be secretive druids or the strong shieldmaidens of earlier times, exploring and dreaming, until the day they met Gwenyffyr and those dreams no longer seamed so distant. Gwenyffyr with her raven-dark hair and innocent brown eyes. And her honeyed tongue, able to make the most blatant indiscretion seem a trivial nuisance. Gwen had been the one to push and to prod and to make things happen. There was no reason, she'd assured her new sisters, they could not make of themselves whatever they wanted. And it had been true.

Gwenyffyr made herself queen, after all.

Even later, with Merlin and Niviane both encouraging Morgana's studies as a healer and a woman of letters, she had divided a great deal of her time between Salish and the Isle. Practicing woodlore as well as finding secluded areas from which to gaze at the stars and begin her study of astronomy. The heavens and the earth. Merlin had promised her both.

Which was how she still recalled the right trail and the proper turns. Gaining a brushy ridge which overlooked Salish and its Roman fortress. Staring back to watch. And wait.

Hearing the cries of discovery. Shouts. And that one, wailing scream.

Holding her breath. Seeing the copper and green swirl of dress, and the silver gleam, and the long red-brown hair trailing out behind as Niviane hurled herself from the battlements, tumbled down into the lake.

Morgana saw the men who waited at the cren eled parapet for Niviane to surface. To see which way she would swim. Or drift.

Niviane would not surface.

The blade she had tangled in her dress—that gleam of bright, sharp metal—weighed too heavily.

“Lady.”

Morgana whirled about, her muddy, bloodstained dress flaring wide. After so many days and more leagues than she wanted to think about, the dress she’d fled the Isle in was more black than gray, more tatters and tears than the strong cloth she preferred.

Her hand darted to the small pruning dagger she carried at her waist.

A panicked reaction. And a useless gesture as the young man stepping from the trees behind her held a bow already nocked with a hunting arrow, the shaft pulled halfway back and held ready.

She stepped toward him, recognizing in his livery the red and black colors of Hampstead. Thinking him still one of hers.

The bow came up quickly. A look of fear in his eyes.

“Gerald.” She recognized him now. He had been to the Isle before. Had visited her threshold. “You do not believe as well?”

But he did, she saw. He did. As the lies had grown, they’d also become easier

to believe, and forgotten were the many services they had performed. Such was the power of the sword of kings. Hadn't Morgana herself witnessed how the tales had spread far and fast warning of Gwenyffyr's adultery and Niviane's broken trust with Merlin? Her sisters, who had both done more in this time of men than any woman could want. Or should. The truth was not as important as years of talk and scandal. Gwenyffyr's daily rides, sitting astride the horse as a man might. Her pursuit of Arthur and her obvious enjoyment of the king. A wanton lust, some had said.

It made it easier to believe that Mordred had not forced himself on the queen in Arthur's absence. By Gwen's own admission, he hadn't.

But how many others would find her at Caerleon?

"I have to ask you not to flee, Lady Morgana."

Gerald held the bow and arrow in strong hands. Ready hands, caloused by years of hunting the local forests. He shouted for others, and voices answered back from the many paths surrounding the village. One or two more from behind the square-shouldered cottages.

"We've heard of Niviane's magic," he said. "She disappeared into the lake."

"She drowned, Gerald."

"And the queen brought ruin to Arthur and to Mordred."

The men had brought such ruin on themselves, squabbling over Britain as if it were a prize to be claimed on the battlefield and not won over in the hearts and minds of its people. Arthur, the great one himself, had forgotten this. At Camlann, his blood soaking the ground black, he'd remembered, but far too late to be of help.

No woman would have made such a mistake.

And if Morgana was to accomplish anything in the short time she had left, she could not be delayed now, held for the marauding knights to claim as spoils, or as victim.

“Niviane was no siren of the lake country,” she said now, approaching the young man. He brought up the bow, pulling it back to full strength, bending over the ashwood. “There was no magic in her voice to bend the ears of men such as Arthur and Merlin in her direction. Merely good sense and an eye for new ways. New paths.”

Gerald jumped back a pace as she nearly touched him. Hands shaking. “Not another step, Lady Morgana. By God, I swear.”

She stopped, but she did not stop talking. Calm, and slow. “Gwenyffyr was a woman, Gerald. With a woman’s desires and failings.” And for her many sins had banished herself to the convent’s darkest cell, to fast and pray for forgiveness from a man now past forgiving.

There were voices yelling for Gerald now, coming from all around. Feet running along the Hampstead lane. A door, slamming closed. He made as if to shout, and Morgana took a chance with a quick step forward and a hand brought to his lips.

“Before you call them to us, think Gerald. Think of what you *know*.”

His eyes were wide and wild, and his lips brushed against her fingers as he whispered. “They say you confuse men’s minds. Bewitch us with sorcery.”

“I heal, and I study. And that is all I’ve ever asked from life, or from the king. Have you forgotten the cut on your leg which festered. The fever which took you at ten years of age? Where did your parents bring you, Gerald?”

“To the Isle of Glass.”

More voices. Several moving closer through the forest. But Morgana refused to rush now, for fear of breaking her spell. “Who saw to you?”

“You did, My Lady.”

Swallowing dryly, tasting the fear at the back of her throat which rose in an acid burn. “Then I will allow you to repay that kindness, and let me pass.” She removed her hand from his mouth and stepped out from in front of the still-ready arrow. “So no matter what else happens, Gerald, you will never blame yourself for betraying my service.”

And she stepped past him. Moving again for the hillside and the deeper forest.

Another step. And again. Faster. Till she finally raced forward for the heavier trees, and the mare she saw tethered on the hillside. Gerald’s horse.

As she saw Gwenyffyr do more than once, Morgana laid her foot into a stirrup and vaulted herself onto the beast’s wide back, straddling it, and taking the reigns in two slender, dirt-stained hands. Kicked the horse into the protection of the woods and paused as she heard the first voices reach the young man who had stood by to let her escape.

“You did nothing, man? Why would you let Black Morgana get away?”

She heard the danger in the question. The rage and the fear.

Fortunately, Gerald did as well.

“She must have spelled me,” he said. “I could not move.”

Morgana kicked the horse again, and this time gave the beast its head.

The ride was no more than a day and the night. Morgana never let up, sitting astride her horse as a man would, leaning down over its neck, which smelled of leather and sweat. The mare raced along old paths known only to hunters and the few—such as herself—who had learned long ago the many secrets of the woods.

When the horse tired, she rested it by leading it forward at a brisk walk.

When it thirsted, they found deep, muddy streams to drink from. The taste of grit did little to comfort, but it kept her going in the long hours she fled ahead of any party out of Hampstead.

Until she found the charred timbers and ashes of her ruined gates. She reined in hard, the mare skidding to a stop so violently it nearly threw her.

The Isle of Glass had never been more than a simple manor. Not so grand as Gwenyffyr sought, nor with the grand intricacies of court, which so drew Niviane. What it had was solitude and the time Morgana desired for her studies, her healing arts.

But her trampled crops would no longer feed a soul. The manor’s ruined walls were protection from no marauders, no brigands. The taste of ash and charred wood slick on her tongue, she stepped over first one servant, then another, as she

abandoned the mare and walked slowly up the hill where her desperate flight had started—and would end.

Her door had been battered aside, and two of her apprentices lay stretched out in death at the threshold. Both young men had had their eyes gouged out, an old ward against evil. Morgana wanted to grieve, and would, but not until she had finished her chore.

Her final duty.

Her feet crunched over broken glass in the entranceway, and she looked above her head to find the skylight smashed. One of many she'd had crafted for her, in fact. And all had been shattered by heavy rods and blades and thrown stones. Two in her sitting room. Four that looked up from the central chamber.

Seeing the destruction visited on her home helped prepare Morgana for the absolute ruin of her lab. Here had been the labor of her love, with an astronomy suspended from ceiling timbers by cables and gears. Powered by the small watermill mounted on the outside wall, each turn of the wheel advanced the suspended world one small measure along its track, spun the moon about it like some child's ring, and turned both bodies around the lamp at the center of the room that represented the sun.

The astronomy, cast in iron, was the only thing to survive the wreck. The grand skylight, which she had designed herself to open the entire room up to the nighttime sky, was gone. Great shards of glass and metal framing littered the floor. Her shelves of herbs were tipped over and scattered. Her flasks were smashed open and many covered dishes thrown against the wall. Books, so many written by her own hand, lay ripped to pieces and trampled under the mob's leavings.

But none had found the small panel hidden in the back of the wall. The doorway that opened into a cramped, short tunnel; a secret only her two

apprentices had known, and had taken to their deaths.

Closing the secret door behind her, Morgana shuffled quickly along the corridor. It was lit, dimly, by a flickering lamp ahead. One with a deep reserve, able to burn for weeks if she let it. She swiped a few spider's webs from her way. Smelled the warm scent of the oil lamp.

And she tasted the musty odor of death. Which could be slowed by the right wrappings, the proper oils, but never put off forever.

Arthur.

A good man. A great king. He lay stretched out on the wooden table where she had tended him after rescuing his wounded body from the field at Camlann, leaving his disappearance a mystery until she could work her arts. But his wounds had been beyond her. Every hour he'd slipped further away, until finally his speech died out to mumbled calls for his wife, his knights, his Camelot.

And still she hid him away. Knowing a mortal's death would never have suited Arthur.

Morgana walked around the small chamber, trailing one hand along the table's smooth edge. Looked down upon a large man with a strong heart and a desperate will to live and do well by his country. She had hoped to return him, fought to return him . . . and failed. But she could honor her final vow, to not let it end. Yes. The sword might be lost, but Arthur's mystery would rise up in its place.

Camelot had fallen.

"But the legend, my brother. I shall ensure that your name will endure for the

years to come. For so long as need be. When a king shall rise once more. This I can do.

“One final service of the Sisters of the Blade.”

TO RIDE THE SERPENT ONCE MORE

Terry Hayman

Terry Hayman is a lawyer who gave up the law for the joys of writing, she has sold stories to *Woman's World*, *Boys' Life*, *Grain*, *On Spec*, *Altair*, *Stitches*, and many other publications.

The way up the mountain path had not seemed so steep the year Medea arrived in this land. Nor the howling snow so stinging. It tasted of chalk and bone. It scoured down to the Asian steppes and blotted out the sun moving low in the southern sky.

A hard gust rocked Medea back so she had to clutch at a rock outcropping to remain upright. Her old muscles shook in their elkskin leggings and coat.

Gods! It was as if Zeus himself drove the wind against her.

But she must not be stopped. She had borne the treachery and lies of men for too long, been driven from place to place too many times. And while this place had finally given her a place to rule, it had also been a place to grow her hate, twisting it inside her, focusing it until she could bear it no longer.

There would be *justice*.

"Halcyone," she whispered.

The name of her daughter gave her the strength to push off the rock and take another twelve steps.

“Iphis.”

Her son. It gave her five more steps.

“Geryon.”

Her second son. Two steps.

Then one step.

None.

Half blind, Medea stopped, swaying, and pulled her muslin scarf around her face with nerveless fingers.

Hecate, help me.

Suddenly, as if the child-wife of Hades had indeed heard, a power seemed to reach out of the depths of the earth itself to sweep through her. The old woman breathed quicker. She blinked her eyes. The whirling snow eddied to reveal a narrow gap in the rocks ahead—her very destination.

With a cry, Medea staggered forward, reached the cave entrance, and squeezed inside.

Why are you here?

The question seemed to throb over and over from the black walls of the cavern that flickered with acrid heat from the great molten river before her.

Yet Medea ignored it.

Once into the cave, her preternatural senses had led her down the long nameless path, one of four in the world, even as her aged body had stumbled near exhaustion.

Now she knelt before the river, her face burning, and gazed hungrily at the giant maw of blackness into which the river flowed. No Cerebrus at this opening. No Charon. But it was still one of the gates to the Underworld and its power.

Why are you here?

She pawed open the elkskin sack her new people had made for her. From it she drew forth a host of small gourds—rabbit blood for life; hoar frost for death; the screech owl's head and wings for freedom; the seeds of calla lily, mountain wart, and other flowers for innocence; and sands from shores of the Ægean Sea, carried a thousand mile on horseback by Mongols of the south, for a declaration of intent.

All these Medea mixed in her three wooden bowls, muttering words of invocation as she did.

When she was done, she drew out the moon-stones she'd used just thrice since she'd tied them into a pouch round her neck aboard the ship, *Argo*. Thrice. Once to renew a man's life. Twice to save her own life.

This time would be to kill.

She lay the stones in a summoning pattern between the three bowls, threw back her hood, and shook free her long silver hair. Then she lifted her hands high in the spit-popping of the air. Her coat sleeves fell back from arms blue with ropy veins and flesh. She wove a pattern in the air above her.

“Celeraphon!” she cried across the crackling hiss of the lava. “Servant of darkness! Snake of the air! Arise again!”

She tossed the contents of her first bowl into the river and felt her fingers burn as fire roared up around them.

“Hecate, release him! Your servant calls! Let him rise!”

She tossed in the contents of the second bowl and felt the flesh of her fingers peel in a second gout of flame, hotter than the first.

“Hades, command him! Medea beseeches! Then I shall be yours forever!”

With trembling fingers, she threw in the last bowl of magics and felt her heart leap inside her as the river roiled up . . . then settled.

“Celara—”

A blast of darkness hurled Medea backwards through the air. But she did not strike the wall that was there. Nor the ground. She tumbled over and over through nothingness, blind, nauseous, until. . . .

Medea.

Suddenly still, Medea raised her head. Before her was the face of a girl she'd never seen and yet knew. No more than sixteen, the girl wore butter-cups in her hair and a simple white tunic spun of sunlight and clouds. Yet she filled the entire space around her, and her eyes were strangely sad, as if used to seeing darkness and disappointment. Or death?

"Hecate?" Medea asked. Also known as Persephone, daughter of Demeter, bride of Hades.

Why do you call on me again?

"Revenge," Medea said.

After so many years? Hecate's eyes grew even sadder. *Have those who wronged you not paid enough?*

Suddenly Medea was a tiny bullfinch in a surreal blue sky. And below? She darted down to the busy court of a white palace overlooking the sea. At the head of an assembled crowd was a squat, balding man. Ægeus! The king of Athens. Medea's second husband.

As Medea fluttered above him, she saw a swaggering youth with an enormous club of iron enter the court. He declared himself one of Ægeus' many bastard sons and challenged the king to accept him. But while most in the court merely gawked, Medea's younger self (so young!) slipped forward with a drug that would reveal Theseus' true intentions.

She was grabbed! Cast to the ground! Accused of attempted murder by her

own husband!

Medea shuddered in the air as her younger self, so wronged yet so strong, used only her moon-stones to call Celeraphon . . .

And Ægeus paid, Hecate's voice said in Medea's head.

The world flipped.

Medea saw Theseus, tanned and happy. He was so full of himself that he sailed back from Crete and the Minotaur without changing his sail color to show he'd survived. Medea flew from his ship, over the oily black waves of the Ægean, and up the Athenian cliffs to where Ægeus, whiter now, watched the black sails approach. "My son is dead," Ægeus whimpered. "My heart is dead." Medea swooped out of his way as he threw himself into the sea and drowned.

Then suddenly Medea was herself again, floating in a blankness of white. Cold white. Bitter on the tongue like dogroot.

"It's not enough," she said. "Theseus was also to blame. And just like his father, Theseus abandoned *his* wives—Ariadne, Hippolyta, his male lover, Pirithous."

Theseus paid.

Another blink of the world and Medea fluttered inside a smoky, closed passageway, over the head of a woman with tight red curls and a broad, glittering smile. She was staring down at an older Theseus, gray haired and pot-bellied, held to the stone by her feet by two masked servants. "Phaedra?" the Minotaur-killer croaked at the red-haired woman. She nodded. The killers plunged their daggers in.

Medea’s little bird heart fluttered and banged against the ceiling in glee.

And Hercules paid. And Paris.

Using all her will, Medea shut her bird eyes and became herself again.

“Show me,” she demanded of the glimmering Hecate, “what happened to my greatest betrayer, the first one, the man for whom I gave up my rightful destiny.”

Are you sure?

“Yes.” Medea took a breath so deep it threatened to tear even this dream form apart. “Show me Jason.”

Blink.

She fluttered above a Medea so young she was almost unrecognizable. Not a beauty. The young Medea’s brow was too thick, her nose too sharp. But the girl was so full of energy, learning the crafts of all Life, beloved by her father and brother. Innocent.

And yearning.

As the old Medea watched, she was momentarily joined with the girl and smitten by the Greek man sudden there. He was beauty incarnate—tall and straight, smooth-muscled, lips too soft for a warrior perhaps, but dark eyes she had seen flash commands to make the heroes and demigods of the *Argo* jump to the ready.

“Help me,” he murmured as he took her hands again, as her heart swelled again in her breast, as she drank in the musk and wine of him, the hardness and desire.

“I will,” she whispered back, old and young.

Then bullfinch Medea flew out of her younger self in distress. She watched Jason use the magics she’d made to yoke her father’s bulls, fight living skeletons, steal the golden fleece, outrun the pursuing ships.

No! The evil Jason asked of her! She killed her own brother. She broke nature’s laws to make Jason’s father young. She helped kill Jason’s usurping uncle.

And—Medea’s wings almost stopped, almost plunged her to the beaten grass of the fields beyond the palace where her younger self had gone with the midwife; this thing *good* but hidden—she bore Jason three children—Halcyone, Iphis, and Geryon.

Hecate, let her not see!

Halcyone, now in a child’s box in a pink seaside villa, home to happy couple, royal and rosy. Home to her younger self. And Jason.

The baby squalled, then grew before her eyes in sped-up seasons. Iphis and Geryon appeared. The children took their first steps across the polished stone floors of the palace, toddled from one parent to the other. Spoke. Laughed. Learned.

Until eleven-year-old Halcyone asked about Jason and the Princess of

Corinth. About why Mommy had been “put aside.” About what she would do now to—

“STOP IT!”

Medea was back on the bank of the River Styx again, her hands shriveled with burns, her face screwed up so tight she could hardly see the terrible shape wriggling its way out of the darkness across from her.

In fact, she smelled it first. Just as in the nightmares that had set her at last on this quest, the fetid stench of rotten meat clutched her nose and throat so hard she could not breath.

The ghastly odor forced her eyes wide. She blinked harshly to clear them, before the urge to vomit finally passed. Then she found her breath and struggled to her feet.

There was no need to act her courage, yet Medea was not afraid. She knew this beast. She’d ridden him thrice before.

“Celeraphon,” she said.

The monster let out a sludgy hiss, unfolded a set of membranous wings from the scaly tube of corpulence that was its body, and, with two thudding beats of its wings, slid up out of the molten fire before her.

The journey back to Thessaly, a horseback journey of months for the nomadic tribe Medea had ruled, Celeraphon completed in two days.

They touched down on the beach of the largest village on the Isle of Lemnos on the second afternoon, under a sky as wide and blue as the all the days of Medea's youth. The entire village panicked. Rightly so, as Celeraphon decided to reach from his lizard-like hind haunches to feast on both the fish catch and the fishermen.

Medea located the city captain. She forced him to kneel before her in the sand and tell what news he had of King Jason.

With perverse pride, she learned the *Argo* was now only one ship of a large Thessalonian fleet. Over half that fleet had been sent to Troy. Few ships had returned, but one that did had stopped at Lemnos, saying Jason had fought well alongside such heroes as Odysseus and Achilles. He had also taken a wife, his fourth, on the voyage home to Thessaly.

Of course, Medea thought grimly. Jason's first wife had been a sorceress and therefore unsuitable. The second had been killed by the first. The third? Perhaps Jason had forgotten her when he went off to war. Such forgetting seemed to be a habit with Greek men.

Screams from the direction of the docks tore Medea's focus from her fact gathering. She watched Celeraphon casually crunch a spear-wielding fisherman almost in two then toss him up to let him slide down the snake's giant gullet. Medea frowned and considered whether to let Hecate's monster have its way with all the men of the town.

Unfortunately, that might bloat Celeraphon's belly and slow his flying. Slow him in the truly important killing. Moreover, even with the magics she was using to sustain her on this final flight, Medea's old bones ached, and her skin was worn raw. If they did not proceed soon, she might not find the will to mount the serpent again.

With a loud, ululating trill of her tongue, she called him to her, climbed

aboard his broad, slippery neck, and grasped one of the floppy, cartilagi nous flaps that protruded in a seemingly random pattern down his spine.

She kicked him with her heels, and they leaped into the air.

Medea's wedding gift to Princess Creusa of Corinth? A poisoned robe. Death.

It takes five days before Jason returns to Thessaly and slams through the doors of Medea's house, his face hard with a need to punish.

"There."

When Medea saw the port of Thessaly and the square-block columns of the palace on the hillside above, she did not swoop down on imaginary bullfinch wings. This time she tugged on Celeraphon's neck flaps, and the monster dove with a roar that made the harbor boats drop their masts and pull for shore.

Like a wave of horses on the steppes, Medea's one-time people scattered up the hill.

Except the Thessalonians had never been her people. They'd never accepted or trusted her.

She leaned forward, wrapped her arms around Celeraphon's neck, and made him dive on the fleeing peasants. Brimstone flew from his mouth, incinerating the screams even as they began. His front talons, reaching like deformed tinder from under his belly, slashed and tore through thatched roofs, tumbled mud-plaster walls. And the fire again, dancing around her, burning as her own villa had burned . . .

Laughing in great gouts of pain, the young Medea whirls Celeraphon around for a second pass. Jason has bruised her face, broken her left arm and two or three ribs, but even he cannot fly like the summoned monster of Hecate.

No! But he can burn!

She can see him running through the flaming rooms of the villa where Medea has pleaded her love for Jason too many times. The clay roof, its supports buckling, has fallen through in chunks all over. He is yelling something frantically as Celeraphon roars out another stream of the River Styx itself, raking the north side of the villa.

Then Celeraphon emits a screech of agony and contracts in the air so hard Medea is almost thrown off. She turns to see Jason's palace retinue, all the men, *running with spears and bows. They have managed to get one arrow into Celeraphon's left wing. The serpent's scales are too tough, but his face, his wings are vulnerable. As is Medea herself.*

Celeraphon bucks again, whirls mid-air. Medea hangs on with all her strength, desperately calling on Hecate's help.

Then she sees . . . Oh gods, no. She sees . . .

Old Medea swept Celeraphon up past the village, up the hill, up the broad steps of the palace, over the columns and roof and down to the open courtyard behind. There she made the serpent set down.

Medea slid from his back, her eyes as wide now to the past as to the present.

This place had once been barren. There were none of these columns and gardens, stone benches, ponds, climbing rose trellises, frilly paths.

Her focus narrowed. All she felt were her scars and the sun's blazing heat. All she smelled was Celeraphon's rot. All she heard was his snorting whuffle and dry scrape as he settled his belly on the stones.

And all she truly *saw* was the shadowed archway she faced just as she had faced the mouth of Hecate's realm.

"Jason!" Medea called to it in the voice she had learned to project across wastes of tundra and snow. "Come forth for justice! You alone!"

From the inner palace—silence.

* * *

Celeraphon is whirling again in the air. And Jason is calling to her now, calling her to look down at their villa.

She will do nothing *he asks.*

Instead she forces Celeraphon to fly to what she has seen farther out, behind the palace guards.

And they are *there. The three nursery women, standing like the Fates. But thank the gods Medea's children are not with them.*

Jason cries again below and behind, and suddenly Medea understands.

Her blood runs cold as she makes Celeraphon flap a tight turn once more. There! On the crumbling, molten roof of the villa. It's Halcyone, clutching Iphis's tiny hand in hers. They must have run to her to warn her of Jason's return. And now Jason, blocked from reaching them, rages blindly at Medea.

"You kill your own children, murderess!"

At a nod and rasping word from Medea, Celeraphon opened his mouth and loosed a stream of molten Styx at the right rear wall of the palace.

At this range, the fire melted and collapsed the wall like river mud. The people inside those rooms spilled out screaming, skin bubbling, trying to flee.

Medea waited.

As she turned again to Celeraphon, a lone figure stepped shakily from the darkness of the archway. *Beautiful youth,* Medea thought for half a second; then Jason, King of Thessaly, stepped fully into the courtyard's sunlight.

He had not grown fat like the Theseus whom Medea had seen in her vision. Nor was he balding like Ægeus. His lineage had given him enough beauty to ensorcel the sorceress, after all, and it had stayed with him. He was just . . . smaller in his kingly robes. And harder too. His hair was dull metal, the full lips thinned, the nose longer than she remembered, the lines worn ruts in a deeply tanned face.

Harder in the eyes, too. They narrowed now as they flicked from Celeraphon's mind-numbing bulk to Medea's own burned and wild mien.

Perhaps he still held the foolhardy courage of his youth. Or perhaps the

separation of twenty-odd strides between him and Medea gave him courage, for he spat at the ground between them.

"Am I the final vomit of your destruction, then?" he said.

Medea laughed, the sound catching roughly inside her ribs as if they remembered as clearly as she how Jason had used the swinging flat side of his sword to "greet" her last time.

"Don't you know who I am?" Medea said. "I'm your wife. Your first and truest."

"Never wife," he said in the formal tones of court. "Naught but a bitch of Colchis. A means to an end."

"Your *wife*. The mother of your three *children*. Of Halcyone, Iphis, Geryon."

"Never! Thou art too unsexed, unnatural, and evil to be mother to anyone. What mother would turn a beast of Hades against her own kind? Kill her own children!"

For a moment, his voice made him again the young Jason, she the young Medea, and his word the truth. For he was the man. His versions of events were the ones accepted by all.

Her voice quavered as she said, "I didn't."

"Deny the attack! Deny the fire!"

"I never meant . . ."

Halcyone screams at her. “Mother! Save us!” And Medea tries. But the arrows and spears are finding their range now, driving Celeraphon backwards in a frenzy, ignoring her commands. Then Medea herself is pierced through the calf and the smell of blood puts the great serpent over the edge. He flies away with Medea clinging to his back. Far away.

Medea’s strength magics had to be wearing off. Her bones felt like grass. Her focus danced in and out. All that held her up now was her hate, yet even that was wavering, fighting with guilt, fighting with age.

As if sensing her weakness, Jason walked slowly forward and spoke quietly so that only she and Celeraphon could hear.

“You, bitch, are nothing.”

Half-reeling, Medea reached out a hand to steady herself on the rough scales of Celeraphon’s neck. Taking it as an unspoken command, Hecate’s monster shot out his stick-like left limb with surprising speed and caught Jason by his robes. With his right limb, the serpent knocked the old king down, tore his upper robes back, and pinned him to the stones before he could even think of his sword.

Medea stepped forward then, her blistered feet still uncertain but her hate flowing back, making her stronger by the second.

“It is you who made me nothing,” she said to Jason’s struggling grunts. “You, your betrayal. I gave you my youth. I gave you my love. I gave you . . . children. And you turned it all into nothing. But this much I will take with me.”

Reaching unsteadily for Celeraphon’s free left limb, she lifted it, separated out one foot-long claw, and with both her hands she positioned it like a knife over her once-husband’s bare chest.

Jason stopped struggling and froze, breathing quickly, his eyes wide and staring into Medea's own.

"Do it," he said.

Medea looked deep into him and wished him into her. Could he see her regret? Any of it? And the hatred, too? Could he *feel* it? Because this much, this heart of his, was meant to be hers alone.

She tightened her grip and positioned her weight over the claw . . .

A scream, a young woman's scream, rang out across the courtyard, almost instantly followed by Jason's hoarse, "Stay back!"

Medea's head jerked up. Without changing her stance, she watched a beautiful woman run across the stones towards her. Full black hair flowed behind a too-round face, sharp nose, heavy brows, all eerily familiar. It was as if Jason, in selecting his last bride, had chosen a copy of his first.

"You heard what your husband said," Medea growled.

"Not husband." The young woman dropped to her knees on the stone and held out both her hands, palms up. Medea could see long burn scars there from hand to shoulder. This close, Medea could see marks on the young woman's neck too.

With silent sobs, the woman offered the marks to Medea like sacrifices. "Mother."

It struck into Medea's heart, as though the claw of Celeraphon had somehow

reversed and struck home. Medea could not breathe. Could not think.

Yet through the numbing silence of the universe stopped, she heard the heavier thump of running feet, looked up and saw a youth barely into his manhood, hurrying across the courtyard to drop beside the young woman. He, too, offered his arms and body as proof. But he did it formally, like his proud father might have taught him.

“Geryon did not survive the fire,” he said.

Iphis!

“Our father saved us,” said the young woman, the image of Medea herself. Halcyone.

Medea’s head buzzed, filled with thick clouds, cleared then buzzed again as if this were yet another vision sent by Hecate. This could not be! Saved? By Jason? By the great betrayer?

But Geryon! Her heart rent again as she recalled his heart-shaped face, her brow and Jason’s lips, and she gasped with such pain she thought she would collapse. She huffed and held on. Geryon dead. As she had always believed. Dead.

But Halcyone and Iphis!

Jason had saved them . . . and let Medea believe they were dead, that she had killed them. A lie beyond cruelty. Beyond madness even.

With a sudden awareness again of Celeraphon’s rotting stink and the smooth spear of horn-claw still in her hands, Medea recaptured the hate she had grown inside her from Thessaly to Athens to the steppes of Asia. She drew up her strength and leaned slowly down on the claw. It pressed against Jason’s tough flesh, started a trickle of blood running from around the point. Jason’s mouth began to contort.

And Medea . . . pulled . . . back.

There was no laughter or forgiveness in it. She still breathed fiercely, almost too blinded by hate to see. Yet Medea had spent her life seeing where others could not. And this time she finally saw what she’d hidden even from herself—her hate was both magic and poison. It killed everything around her as surely as the robes she had given to the second woman foolish enough to love this wretch called Jason.

Only one thing had changed.

“I’m not nothing,” she told the supine father of their children. “Not now. Not anymore.”

She put aside Celeraphon’s claw and grasped his stick limb to struggle up to her feet.

“Perhaps,” she said as she looked at her daughter and surviving son, only partly hers and yet proof of all she had been, “I never was nothing. I . . . did not expect this. This will take some thought.”

Iphis, obviously possessed of his father’s tactless drive to command, made to stand. Celeraphon huffed him back roughly to his knees without being asked.

Slowly, with great pain in her limbs but a feeling this too would pass, Medea

climbed up on Celeraphon’s lowered neck and grasped a riding flap on his neck.

The great serpent rose up, huffed once down at the still-imprisoned king of Thessaly, and lifted his foot. Jason scrambled backwards, evoking a small sneer from his son.

Halcyone had eyes only for her mother.

“Will we see you again?”

Medea looked down at this new younger self of hers and allowed a too-rare smile to slip across her lips. “The world is bigger than you know, daughter.”

She dug her heels into Celeraphon’s sides, and she felt the power of the great wings stretch and beat under the great blue of the late afternoon sky, the coil of his body sink back against the powerful rear haunches.

Then they shot up toward forever.

LILITH

Peter Orullian

Peter Orullian is the author of *At the Manger, the Stories of Those Who Were There,* as well as being a talented editor and book reviewer. These days, he spends his writing time on his current novel, as well as on developing content for Xbox.

***E**ve wasn't first.*

I was.

Eve . . . mother of creation, my ass. I'm the one that gives the sons of men their first erection and the burning in their loins.

Lilith let the old thoughts simmer as she paused on the cool cement walk in the starlight shadow of a tall elm. Cricket-song filled the darkness with soft susurration. The dew had begun to gather in the recently mown grass, lifting a green smell tinged with the musk of loam. And beyond the grass rose up a two-story prefab home with beige vinyl siding, trimmed in white. In the upper window burned a light against the darkness. That room pulled her nearer, a feeling: One of her children was there, in this strange house, in that room, in danger.

Casting her gaze up the suburban street, she smiled bitterly. All these homes were so neatly tended, but they were all the same (as far as she was concerned). Mortals hemmed up in tidy quadrants trying to put meaning into their days—barbecuing in the evening, trimming their hedges on weekends. What was it

about the sons and daughters of Eve that they all put their hands to horticulture, as if they might recreate Eden for themselves?

She shook her head and narrowed a scrutinizing gaze back on the lighted window. The pane of glass served as yet another reminder of the very long walk that had brought her here from her beginning.

If Eve had only listened.

She recalled going to visit the rib to try to talk some sense into her. She'd found Eve standing in a slow fall of sun not far from a small brook. Cottonseed drifted lazily in the light, stirring in Lilith's passage as she strode past several lilac bushes.

"He doesn't love you, Eve," Lilith had said. "He complained to Father because I chose to leave, and he needed someone else to couple with."

"Sounds like jealousy," replied Eve.

Lilith shot out an exasperated breath, shook her head, then laughed. "You know why I left? Because he wouldn't let me be on top."

"What? On top of—"

"Sex, dear, sex. Your man, Adam, insisted that I always be in the recumbent position. To hell with that. I'm made of dust, just the same as he is. I'm not inferior to him."

It was Eve's turn to shake her head. "You were fashioned of filth and sediment."

Lilith folded her arms and paced to the edge of the small brook. Looking down, she said quite casually, “Yes, but you should know that Adam has sired several children for me already.”

“That’s a lie!” Eve’s face had flushed.

“Now who’s jealous?” Lilith had replied, showing a lopsided grin.

In the shadow of the elm thrown by starlight, Lilith held the same crooked grin she remembered from so long ago. Of course, Eve had stood by her man, had mothered many healthy mortal children. But Lilith hadn’t exactly been celibate, either. The difference being that because she’d departed Eden before things got ugly, she’d avoided mortality. Which meant that the children she had by mortal men came into the world twisted and damned—demons they were called by some.

To her, they were her kids. Maybe with inclinations that often proved unhealthy to the children of Eve, but that didn’t trouble Lilith much.

And now she had the motherly sense that one of her kids needed her. Here in suburbia. In a second story room where a light burned and threw a soft green hue against the window glass.

So she started toward the front door, thinking of some words that had been ascribed to her over the years: *negotium perambulans in tenebris* . . . that which moves in the darkness.

The home stood silent, the faint scent of lasagna just above the smells of leather sofas and Pledge furniture polish. Lilith imagined she could actually taste *mundane* on the air.

She truly had never felt apologetic for her part in harrowing the lives of men (by which she meant men and women). They just so deserved it. Stupid creatures. Stupid as their first mother and father. Lasagna. Furniture polish.

At the top of the stairs she turned left down a wide hall. She could already see the light beneath the last door on the left. If anything happened to one of her children, this family would earn more heartache than they ever dreamed possible.

At the bedroom door she paused, listening, sensing. No one rustled on the other side. Save the light, it seemed as empty and dead as the rest of the home.

Then she slowly pushed the door open, ready to shriek inside and cause men to cower.

Instead, she took two steps and saw an infant girl sleeping in a thick cherry wood crib on the right. The room smelled like a newborn, too: shampoo, scented diapers, and the smell of a child's skin. The walls had been painted in light green and trimmed with pink and purple pastels. The soft hum of a baby monitor came from a transmitter on the changing table.

To the left a man slept reclined in a rocker, his head lolling back at an uncomfortable angle. A dribble of drool seeped from one corner of his mouth.

He smelled . . . grown up.

Lilith drew near the man, bringing her mouth up to his, her lips trembling a finger's breadth away. He smelled of Ivory soap and dryer sheets. His face showed a day's growth of beard. But, ah, was he handsome.

And that age old feeling stirred between her legs. Lilith began to breathe deeply over the man’s nose, taking in his breath when he exhaled. How sweet. Moist, slow suspiration. She drank it in like wine. Better was it, than any kiss. Then she parted her lips and let out her own slow exhalation, giving him the warm air of her lungs as he breathed in. This unconscious, intimate exchange exhilarated her.

Succubus, mortal men often called her in their myths. She rather liked the name. It rang with a hint of sensuality, which suited her fine. Better than hag or witch or sorceress. Though she liked the power implied by the last.

After a few moments, the man relaxed deeper into his chair with the swapping of breath. He wouldn’t wake now until she’d finished.

Lilith mounted him, straddling his crotch and putting her lips to his ear. The soft, tenuous curves of the cartilage brought a needful groan from her throat and she pressed herself against him.

The man tensed in response, his biology predictable.

And she began to move, abandoning herself to the moment. In truth, it was the only time she completely forgot the beginning of it all.

Bliss . . .

A few minutes later, she was done, and she had coaxed from him his seed, the same way she had from countless men before him and would from countless more. There would be another child, another demon, another one to harrow up the lives of men.

But a new feeling touched somewhere in the back of her mind, a feeling she'd had once before recently: She hated the life she consigned her children to. Disembodied, angry spirits who only wanted the same opportunity mortal children had—a body to feel and experience mortality.

Filth and sediment or not, she'd just wanted her turn on top, to be considered equal. Then all her wretched children would have had their chance.

To think a little pride had started it all.

She stood up from the man and watched as his body relaxed again into the rocker. He wore a peaceful expression that didn't seem right on his face for some reason. No matter. She turned to the infant.

This mortal child was female.

She was less than twenty days old.

And she'd been possessed by one of Lilith's own children.

"Aludon," she said softly, "Everything seems fine. Why did you call for me?"

"Because I asked him to," came a voice behind her.

Lilith whirled to see the man in the chair with bleary eyes staring up at her.

"Ah, hell. You guys are supposed to stay asleep after sex." She raised her hands, readying herself for a fight.

“Give me a moment first,” he said, holding his palms up in a gesture for her to relax.

She appraised him warily, keeping her hands in front of her.

The man retrieved a glass vial standing on a whitewashed bookshelf behind him. He pulled it around and gripped it in one fist. “Holy water,” he said. “I’ll tell you the truth. I didn’t much believe in this stuff. But it’s interesting what you’ll try when the alternatives are gone.”

“Exorcism,” Lilith muttered, “great.” She understood now why she’d been summoned. She gave the guy an exasperated look. “I hate this shit,” she exclaimed, and stepped backward to a second rocker and took a hard seat.

“What?”

“The movies have made amateur exorcists of everybody. I swear I spend as much time rescuing tortured spirits as . . . never mind.”

The man lowered the glass vile and stared. “Who are you?”

“I’m not having this conversation.” She scrubbed her face and looked at the child through the crib bars. Aludon had a penchant for infants. She knew he secretly hoped that inhabiting one of their bodies might result in full assumption of the mortal frame. She didn’t bother trying to convince him otherwise.

“I’m Paul—”

“I don’t care for names,” she cut in. She smiled a bit over the crestfallen look that replaced the hope in his eyes. “You haven’t a clue, my friend.” Then she shifted and gave him a wry look. “How were your dreams?”

Again Paul's face changed—embarrassment this time. He looked down at his crotch, where she imagined she could see a wet spot.

"Spontaneous emission?" she quipped.

He lifted a puzzled expression toward her.

"Wet dream," she clarified. "Was I there?"

He nodded involuntarily.

"That's sweet," Lilith returned. "Now, are we really going to do this whole exorcism bit? Even Peter Blatty, who wrote the damned book, took a day off."

Paul's face changed yet again. This time, resolution set in, something unyielding that she found she admired.

"I'm not going to pretend to understand it all," Paul began. "It's been a long time since my own confirmation. But my little girl has been sick since the day we brought her home from the hospital. They can't find a thing wrong with her. But I've seen a glimmer in her eyes, intelligence, but in a way that isn't quite . . . human."

"Maybe she's advanced," Lilith opined glibly. "Don't most of you folks think your kids are advanced?" She grinned.

Paul ignored that. "Then, sometimes, I get the feeling she can understand me. I mean really understand me. Like there's comprehension of the words I'm saying, but she either can't or won't reply."

“So you’re bored with the one-sided conversations and have decided the girl can be healed with water.” Lilith rested her head back against the rocker and began to rock. “I hate suburbia.”

Paul stood up, keeping the water in hand, and went to the crib. He looked down at his daughter and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. Without looking at Lilith, he spoke softly, “There’s nothing a parent won’t try when it comes to his child.”

“Nice Hallmark sentiment. Now, look, let’s not make a thing out of this. Let me collect my own and we’ll get out of your hair.”

Paul turned then, controlled fury in his face. “She’s a child. Why would anyone do this to a child?”

“I’m not your Sunday school teacher. Do you want this to go hard?” Lilith stopped rocking.

“It’s too late for that. I’ve been doing some reading—”

“Let me guess,” Lilith cut in, “on the Internet.”

Paul said nothing for a few moments. Then softly, “I don’t think Ellen will survive the physical separation from the spirit inside her. She’s too weak.”

Neither of them spoke. The sound of the baby monitor grew loud in the silence. A white noise like static tuned low, far away, small waves of sound with no articulation, winking in and out with a frequency that left a low unassuming and yet ominous feeling in the nursery.

It reminded Lilith of a truth she tried daily to forget.

Then she leveled her gaze on him. “Did your Internet reading reveal my name? Did it tell you that one hundred of my children die everyday as punishment for not returning to play servile housewife to some control freak. Don’t expect me to fall all to pieces over the life of one mortal baby.”

Paul opened his mouth to speak but said nothing. He looked back at his daughter.

Lilith smiled. “Tell me. When you have sex, do you always assume the missionary position?”

The question achieved the desired effect; Paul’s brow furrowed in surprise. “What?”

“I get the impression you’re a guy who likes to be in control. You did quite the job of luring me here, didn’t you? All ready with your holy water, too. But it’s kind of a hollow threat, isn’t it? I mean, you said it yourself: Your daughter’s too weak to suffer separation. You’re not going to go splashing holy water on anybody.”

Paul squared his shoulders to her, and Lilith saw that one thing she would never completely understand, that one something deep in the mortal race. Maybe it was love, maybe it was selflessness. Or maybe it was a desperation only a creature that dies can know.

His face softened, and Lilith thought she saw the truest part of the Fall of Adam in Paul’s pleading expression. “Please don’t do this. I took a chance that threatening an exorcism might flush you out. I’m glad it worked. And I can’t imagine what it’s like to live your life. But you came here to protect someone that means something to you. How is that different from what I want for Ellen?”

Lilith stood sharply from her rocker, sticking her face near Paul’s. This time,

though, she was inclined more to bite him than taste his sweet breath. “Don’t you ever compare yourself to me! You have no idea what’s it’s like to be banished for simply not wanting to be thought inferior! You have no idea what’s it’s like to have your God condemn your children to death by the hundreds, thousands!” She showed him withering eyes and lowered her voice to a husk. “You have no idea what it’s like to live with the knowledge you were created from filth and meant only to serve.”

Paul never dropped his eyes. And he lowered his hand holding the holy water. “You’re right . . . but don’t do this anyway.”

Lilith had no words. Neither did she move.

Paul gave her a long look. Then he knelt, pleading, making himself subservient to her. His face shone with utter humility, and never, Lilith guessed, had it looked more beautiful. Anguished hope pulled at his eyes and mouth. “I love her more than anything,” he whispered, emotion catching in his throat. “If there’s any way to save your child and mine, I will do it—anything.”

The sight of this simple mortal, kneeling in his daughter’s nursery to plead for a single, fragile life, got inside her.

And something happened Lilith never expected. Not in all the years and miles she’d walked, nor all the men she’d hunched over to steal their seed. She voluntarily knelt with Paul, looking directly across at him, making them equal. She studied his pleading eyes, amazed, a little confused, but with a glorious wonder that filled her chest with a sweet ache like nothing she’d ever felt before.

But both children could not be saved. Lilith knew it as soon as she’d seen the infant. The trauma Aludon had imposed on Ellen by commandeering her body had left her at death’s proverbial door. To save the mortal child . . .

Lilith remembered Eve and wondered for the first time if that stubborn bitch

hadn’t made the harder choice after all, going into the dark and dreary world to live and die with men, raising children, knowing the harshness they would surely face.

And then she looked again at Paul and thought that something finer had descended from the loins of the couple from Eden. Perhaps real strength had less to do with defiance and more to do with sacrifice.

Reaching out with one hand, Lilith took Paul’s hand, the one holding the vial. She squeezed once and gently removed it from his fingers. She then leaned in and kissed him on the cheek with unfeigned affection. In all her dark years, it was the only kiss she’d offered in tenderness.

Rising, she removed the stopper from the vial and leaned in over the sleeping child. For the first time in millennia, she regarded a tranquil beauty in the babes of men. An innocence filled with promise that she would never truly touch. All the same, she smiled, and the sweet ache returned to her chest.

In a whisper, “I’m sorry, Aludon, but it must be this way. I do love you.”

Then, with a softness she imagined a mother would show, she washed the child’s head with the water, blocking from the world the shrieks that rose from her own child as the profane began to dissipate inside Ellen’s body. The mortal child’s hair matted in thin lines beneath Lilith’s tender touch, while inside the little girl’s body, another child who’d longed only for a mortal shell gave out a great cry that only its mother would ever hear. The sound of it tore at her heart. However vile the creature had been, however tormenting, he was her son.

The betrayal he must feel, being killed by his own mother, whom he’d reached out to for redemption and safety from the very water she now used to destroy him . . . it touched her heart, too. Soft, gentle gestures had often been used to betray the beloved. This time, Lilith’s hand turned the damnable deed. She would never be able to articulate the simultaneous calm knowledge in her

heart that what she did was right but also terrible. Stony as her soul might be, this moment blighted a portion she knew she could never reclaim.

And then it was over.

Aludon’s gasps faded to nothing. The thin, invisible substance of him evaporated forever.

Paul stood beside Lilith, watching as his daughter drew a long, shuddering breath, filling her lungs as though for the first time. Roses bloomed in her cheeks, and she sighed against the blanket on her chest, the sound of it like all the hope the world would ever need.

Lilith handed Paul the vial. “Your daughter will live,” she said.

Tears welled in the young father’s eyes. Gratitude beamed from his face as a smile spread on his lips that would live in her memory as brightly as anything she knew. Then Paul spontaneously hugged her, squeezing her with tight affection.

“I will never forget what you have done,” he managed in her ear as they embraced. “And I won’t let Ellen forget either.”

She gave Paul a genuine smile, no regret turning down corners of her mouth, and took herself back to the stair, the door, and the cool walk beneath the starlight and elm trees. All the while, she held on to the foolish hope that the child conceived tonight inside her, Paul’s child, might be different from those that had come before. That perhaps what they’d shared could overcome the damnation of being the first.

It proved a beautiful thought to stroll by as she moved slowly up the street,

abiding somewhat better the neatly tended grass and hedges.

HOMELESS

Annie Reed

Annie Reed has sold short fiction to *Ellery Queen*, three volumes of *Strange New Worlds*, and *Battlecorp*, a classic BattleTech website. She writes mystery and science fiction as well as women's fiction.

Hera remembered beauty. She remembered warm summer rain and cool evening breezes, the sweet smell of jasmine and the sweeter taste of revenge. She remembered the power of the gods and the subservience of mortals, and she remembered her children and her husband. All things long gone in this modern world, which had forgotten her.

Chill wind buffeted her through the threadbare wool of her stained coat, whipped her matted gray hair about her deeply lined face. Shoulders hunched against the cold, Hera shuffled along a city street bordered not by temples of marble and granite but by monstrous buildings of chrome and steel, brick and glass. Monuments to money, not to ancient gods, crowded this world. The air tasted thick and foul and smelled of hot metal and snuffed can dlewicks. The rumbling, screeching noise of automobiles and buses made her head ache. The sidewalk was hard and unforgiving beneath her aching feet.

She held her coat closed with numb fingers and looked for a place to rest for a while. Just for a short while, until someone told her to leave, and then she would begin the search all over again like the rest of this city's homeless.

Hera avoided brightly lit places, just as she avoided staring at the people who crowded the pathways of unforgiving concrete in this city of modern man. People never looked at her, not anymore. She was just another in an endless

stream of dirty, unwanted street people, unpleasant reminders of what could happen if the fates were less than kind. She avoided looking in the windows of the buildings she passed, afraid she might catch a glimpse of her own reflection in the glass. She remembered her beauty. Only by avoiding the reality of her ravaged face could that be enough.

Sometimes Hera wondered if other ancient gods walked the streets of this world as she did. No longer worshiped, the gods had faded like the titans before them. Some found their place among the stars in the night sky, as Zeus had. Others had fled to the depths of the ocean or to deep caverns beneath the earth. In time even the gods of this modern age would fade as man found new gods to deify. Gods without believers could not exist.

Yet Hera had stayed. She had grown old and bent and haggard with the passage of time, and she had been powerless to prevent it. She waited to fade completely, to take her place with Zeus and her children in the night sky, but something kept her here. Some power had cursed her with this shadow existence, neither mortal nor immortal, neither woman nor goddess, and utterly alone.

Hera heard sniggering laughter behind her, and suddenly rough hands pushed at her back, shoved her hard until she stumbled. Hera cried out as she tried to keep her balance. Behind her the laughter grew louder, grew cruel and self-indulgent.

“Got anything on you, grandma?”

“C’mon, let me see you, bitch.”

Hera tucked her head down and tried to run. Evil men existed in every century. The young men behind her might have worn the garb of soldiers in her time, might have used their swords and station to take what they wished from unwilling women. In this age they used knives and the indifference and fear of people around them. Hera knew no one would help her.

She almost got away. Her legs, stiff from the cold, refused to move as fast as she wished. She heard heavy feet pound the pavement behind her, and she tasted her own fear, coppery hot in her mouth. She had never learned to fight. Gods had men to fight their battles for them. Hera's revenge had always been much more subtle.

Another shove to her back, and this time Hera fell. She put her hands out in front of her, and when she hit the concrete she felt the impact through her whole body. A sharp pain exploded in her knee, and she cried out again.

The young men turned her over, picked her up by her arms and dragged her into a filthy alleyway and shoved her against a cold, brick wall. Beyond the alleyway, a few people turned curious, fearful eyes toward her, but most kept their heads down and walked by. No one stopped to help.

Her attackers were both dark-skinned men with mean, narrow eyes. One wore a knit cap over dirty, stringy hair, and grinned a gap-toothed smile at her that smelled of rotten fish. The other had a shaven skull and wore thick, gold chains around his scrawny neck. He had tattoos on his hands and dirty, ragged fingernails. He didn't smile, and the gleam in his eyes frightened her. She might not be able to fade from this world, but she could feel the pain these men would inflict on her. She wondered if she could die.

"I said, what you got, grandma?" the one with the knit cap said. "You ain't being sociable-like. We just want to talk to you, and here you run away on us. Ain't that right?" he said to his companion.

The other man didn't say anything, just grabbed at her coat, ripped it open and began pawing at her clothes. They didn't want her, just wanted whatever money she might have, anything of value she might own that they could steal. The jewels and riches she had possessed once were as long gone as her power. These men would hurt her when they discovered she had nothing.

She tried to fight back. She raked her fingernails down the cheek of the man with the tattoos, beat at him with her fists. He hit her hard across the face, a blow that made her head ring and her vision gray out, and then the man with the knit hat pulled a knife from his pocket and held it against her throat.

"Damn, grandma, don't you know that ain't nice?" He pressed the knife closer, and she felt the pressure of the cold blade against her skin as her head echoed with the blow to her face and his rotten breath made her stomach clench. "You know what we do to people who ain't nice?"

"I have nothing," she managed to say, her voice rough and whisper thin from disuse. "Leave me alone."

"Oh, we'll leave you alone, all right. Right after we teach you not to go around hitting people."

Hera saw movement behind the two men. She heard a whish of displaced air and then a solid *whump* as something hit the back of the man with the tattoos. His bruising grip on her faltered as he fell against her then dropped to his knees.

"What the—"

The man holding the knife against her throat never finished his question. Hera could see a third man in the alleyway now. He wielded his cane like a staff, brought it down on the head of the man with the knife. Hera heard the solid crack of wood impacting bone. The knife dropped from his fingers and he fell to the ground, and the man with the cane struck him again. Blood began to soak through his knit cap and run down the side of his face in deep red streaks, and he lay still on the garbage-strewn floor of the alleyway.

Her remaining attacker let go of her. "Not doing nothing, man," he said. He raised his hands up in front of himself as if to ward off another blow.

Hera’s rescuer held his cane ready to strike another blow. The man with the tattoos got up off his knees, winced as he straightened his back. Hera scooted away from him along the wall. He glanced once at his unconscious companion, then turned and fled down the alley.

Her rescuer heaved a shaky sigh. “Come,” he said. He held a hand out to Hera. “He’ll be back with friends. I only won this time because I surprised them. I might not be so lucky again.”

For the first time Hera got a good look at him. He did not appear much younger than she looked. His hair was thick and black and salted heavily with grey at his temples, his complexion sallow. His shoulders and arms appeared well-muscled beneath his thin coat, his hands long-fingered with large knuckles. His blue eyes were faded, and Hera saw kindness in his expression. Still, she eyed his hand warily. For long years no one had talked to her with kindness.

He smiled a little, the corners of his lined mouth tipping up slightly. “I won’t bite,” he said.

A groan from the unconscious, bleeding man decided her. She didn’t take her rescuer’s hand, but she walked out of the alley as quickly as she could beside him. Sharp pain lanced through her knee and up her spine with each step.

“How badly are you hurt?” he asked.

She would have preferred he not notice her limp. She did not need pity. She risked a quick glance at his face. She didn’t see pity in his eyes, only concern. Perhaps because he walked with a limp himself, he knew how damaging pity could be, as hurtful as any physical blow.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. This attack had not been the first. It would not be the last, not as long as she stayed in this world. One thing had not changed since her

day—the strong still preyed upon the weak. She would heal.

They walked in silence putting more distance between themselves and the alley. Hera resisted looking over her shoulder. Instead she concentrated on the footfalls of the people around her, listening for a quick shuffle, a faster cadence, something to warn her that her attackers were back with reinforcements.

The thump of her rescuer's cane added a counterpoint to their own footfalls. Hera remembered another odd gait, a beat that echoed in her heart from the marble halls of her memory. A child's laughter, his father's anger. Zeus had been so contemptuous of their son's lameness that Hera herself had flung Hephaestos from the heavens, believing ridding the heavens of her son was the only way to rid herself of her failing as a mother. Only later did she realize what her true failing had been.

She glanced at her companion. What would Hephaestos look like if he had survived, as she had, all these centuries? He had been young and beautiful, his only flaw his lameness. Could she even recognize him? Would he recognize her?

"What is your name?" she asked.

When he turned his face to look at her, she glanced away quickly, regretted the question. The fates would not be kind enough to deliver her to her son, not after all this time.

"James," he said. "James Henderson."

He paused, obviously waiting for Hera to supply her own name. She tried not to feel bitter disappointment as her brief hope died. She pressed her lips together and lowered her head again, concentrated on listening to the footfalls around them and said nothing.

“Are you hungry?” he asked after a moment. “There’s a diner a half block away, I hear the food’s not too bad. I’d be happy to buy you . . .”

The rest of the sentiment went unsaid as Hera shook her head. She had lived this existence long enough to know that she would not be allowed to stay inside any restaurant even if James accompanied her. The homeless, even those with money to pay, were not welcome where other people went to dine.

“I’m sorry,” James said. “I didn’t think. How about I go inside and buy you a sandwich? Will you wait for me? I promise not to be long.”

Hera’s stomach rumbled at the thought of food. She could not remember her last true meal.

“Thank you,” she said.

When she risked another glance at him, he was smiling.

She waited for him outside the diner. The rich aroma of roasted meat wafted through the plate glass door as it shut behind him. Hera’s mouth watered, and her tired legs trembled. She remembered the feasts of long ago, tables piled high with pork and mutton and venison, great platters of roast pheasant and goose, and all the fruits of the land ripe for the eating. Perhaps this new existence was truly the underworld and she had passed over the River Styx without the memory of having done so. How far the great Hera had fallen to be reduced to a tattered hag waiting like a lowly servant for a scrap of charity from a mere mortal. She turned her face away in disgust from her reflection in the doorway, not before noticing the same disgust on the faces of the people inside the diner.

She did not want to wait here. She didn’t need some mortal man’s charity.

She had nearly reached the end of the block when she heard James yell for her.

“Wait!” he shouted. “Please wait!”

She heard the unique shuffle-thump of his odd gait, faster now than when he’d been walking alongside her. In her memory she saw her son’s face as he fell from heaven. She wanted to flee. She thought of how James had risked his own safety to come to her aide when no one else did.

She waited.

“Here,” he said when he reached her. He held a paper-wrapped sandwich out awkwardly in front of him. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted, so I got you turkey on whole wheat. I hope that’s okay.”

She nodded her thanks, reached out for the sandwich but almost pulled her hand away when she caught sight of her blackened fingers, the dirty nails contrasting so sharply against the pristine white of the paper wrapping.

Her hunger finally drove her to take the sandwich. Her cheeks burned with shame as she unwrapped a small corner of the paper and turned away to eat.

She expected James to leave her then, but he stayed by her side. He took a small brown paper bag from his jacket pocket, unwrapped a pastry dusted with white sugar that smelled of almonds and butter.

“My one vice,” he said. “My wife was always after me to quit, said this stuff would be the death of me.” He took a bite, smiled as he wiped a bit of sugar from his upper lip. “I could think of worse ways to go.”

He nodded toward a weathered bench next to a bus stop. Hera sat down at one end, one elbow resting on the cold wrought iron arm as she tried to make herself take up as little space as possible. Her knee complained as she sat, but she closed her eyes for a moment as she enjoyed the sheer pleasure of being able to get off her feet.

James sat down beside her, not so close that any portion of his body touched hers, but close enough to discourage anyone from approaching her to tell her to leave. He had an identical expression of relief on his face at being able to sit down.

He placed his cane between his knees and held the hooked end with one hand. Hera looked for the first time at the scuffed wood of the cane, at the finish worn away from the handle through long years of use.

“Congenital defect,” he said, almost as if he had read her thoughts. “I used to wear leg braces as a kid. Now pretty much I can get around with just a cane unless I wear myself out.” He took another bite of his pastry. “I try not to wear myself out.”

“Yet you came to my rescue.”

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. Just for a moment she had forgotten the hard-earned rules she had learned to live by. Don’t draw attention, don’t let anyone in. It had just been so long since she’d had a conversation with anyone. The companionship warmed her as much as the food filled her belly. She would miss this after James left.

“You reminded me of my mother,” he said. He shrugged and took another bite of his pastry.

Hera froze, the memory of her own son sharp and immediate. For a moment

she could smell him, that unique scent he'd had as a child in her arms, and pain settled in her chest and stole her hunger away. She slowly wrapped the sandwich back in its paper and put it in a pocket of her coat.

"I should go," she said. She leaned forward to get up, and James put a hand on her arm to stop her.

"Don't. I'm sorry if I upset you."

She looked at his face, and this time let her glance linger. She still saw no pity, only sorrow now.

"Please," he said. "Stay and eat. At least a little more? You hardly ate anything."

She held his gaze for another moment. He was not her Hephaestos, she knew that. The truth did not make her pain any less.

"You remind me of my own son," she said through numb lips.

"You have a son? Family? Then why are you . . . ?" He gestured toward the street. "Don't you have anyone to care for you?"

She shook her head. "They are all gone from this world. And my son . . ." She looked down at her lap, unable to hold his gaze any longer. She didn't want to see disillusionment in his kind eyes. "He would not want to see me."

"Why?"

"He believes I did not want him."

She shivered at the memories. She had looked down often on Hephaestos on the Island of Lemnos he had claimed for his own after his fall from the heavens. He had never looked back.

“I was foolish,” she said. “I acted out of rash anger and wounded pride. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late.”

James sat in silence. Hera gathered her courage and looked at him, ready to take his anger in the place of her lost son’s. She was surprised to find no judgment in his expression, only thoughtfulness.

“You gave him away,” he said.

The words hung flat in the cold air between them. Sounds of the city surrounded them, but James’ quiet words shouted inside her skull, repeated and magnified until they formed the shape of her crime.

She found some of the old anger within herself. She didn’t need this man’s understanding. She needed his fury. She wanted him to rail against her, to condemn her actions against Hephaestos as she had done herself throughout these long centuries of endless wandering.

“I threw him out,” she said. “He angered me with his infirmity. How could a damaged child spring from my womb? How dare he?”

Still James sat there. He winced at her harsh words, but she saw no judgment in his face.

“How dare *you?*” she cried. “How dare you think you can understand my pain? That you, with your lameness, can rescue someone like me? What would you save me from? I am a pariah in this world. I am invisible. Powerless. No one can save me.”

Spots of color had formed high on his cheeks. Still, when he spoke his voice held no blame.

"You," he said. "You are the only one who can save yourself."

She felt his words slap her almost like the blow from her attackers. What little food she had eaten was a hard, sickening lump in her belly.

"If you cannot forgive yourself, whether your son can forgive you won't matter."

He couldn't understand. "It's too late," she whispered. "Far, far too late."

He shook his head. "It's never too late. As long as you're alive, it's never too late."

He took the hand off his cane and rested it on her arm. She didn't pull away from his touch.

"My mother died last fall," James said, and his voice caught a little as he said it. "Car accident. Sudden. Unexpected. We quarreled the last time I spoke to her. I wanted her to come visit me in the city, told her I would come pick her up. She insisted on driving. Stubborn woman. The last time we talked, we argued, and then she was gone. I beat myself up a lot about that, wished we had ended things another way." He squeezed her arm a little. "The point is, as long as you're here, you have the opportunity to forgive each other. You can say 'I'm sorry' and have it mean something."

She looked down at his hand on her arm. "I don't know where he is," she said.

He patted her arm and then let go. “If I remind you of him, why don’t you tell me? Maybe that’s the first step in forgiving yourself.”

Could she do that? Would it be enough? Centuries of guilt and sadness alleviated with a simple apology?

She reached for his hand, felt the warm dryness of his skin. She held his long fingers with her own dirty, trembling ones, and after she calmed herself as much as she could, she raised her eyes to meet his gaze.

“I always loved my son,” she said. “I didn’t realize how much until after he was gone. I cannot change what I have done, and I have done many things for which I am ashamed. The only thing I truly regret is how I treated my son. He is perfect in my eyes. I love him still, and I hope he can forgive me.”

James smiled at her, squeezed her hand. Hera allowed herself a small smile in return as a weight seemed to lift from her chest. The air around her smelled less foul. Her stomach unclenched, and she breathed in deep and thought about eating the remainder of her sandwich in her coat pocket. For a moment the colors of this world seemed brighter and the wind felt warmer, the constant noise of the city less jarring.

And then it all began to fade.

Hera felt herself slump almost as if she was folding in on herself. She began a boneless slide from the weathered bus stop bench. She heard James call for her, felt him tug on her hand in an attempt to keep her from falling onto the hard concrete sidewalk. She couldn’t respond to him any more than she could control her body.

She landed on the concrete but felt no impact as even the ground beneath her felt insubstantial. She saw James hovering over her as if from a great distance.

She looked at the sky. Day had bled away and she saw pinpricks of stars far overhead. In her mind she heard the voice of her husband, silent these long, lonely years, and if she could have cried in relief she would have.

“Come home, wife,” Zeus said. “You have been missed.”

Hera closed her eyes. James’ panicked face was the last thing of this world she saw. She wished she could thank him. Wished she could intercede on his behalf so that he could make things right with his own mother, but the gods of this modern age did not acknowledge the pleas of the ancient gods who had gone before.

And then she heard the voice she had longed for even more than her husband’s. Hephaestos looked down at her from his place among the stars. He smiled at her and held out his hand, much as James had done.

“I forgive you,” her son said.

SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH

Christina F. York

Depending on whom you talk to, Christina F. York is either a romance writer who does science fiction, or a science fiction writer who does romance. Either way, she finds it difficult to color within the lines. Her first work was self-published at ten. Finding she wasn't a publisher, she retired to complete grammar school. After college, marriage, two kids, divorce, and another marriage, she returned to writing, with the encouragement of her husband, writer J. Steven York. Since then she has sold nonfiction, short stories, and novels and has worked as a technical writer. Her latest novel, *Dream House*, is a December 2004 release from Five Star, and *Enigma Ship*, in collaboration with her husband, is included in *Star Trek S.C.E.: Wildfire* (November 2004) from Pocket. A native of Oregon, Chris has always lived on the West Coast. The Yorks now live on the Oregon Coast, where Chris has a view of the ocean from her office window. She and her husband split their time between solo and collaborative work, and serving their two feline masters.

They say that history is written by the victors. Take it from one of the vanquished, truer words were never spoken.

Seriously, if that willful little girl hadn't become the queen, don't you think the story just might have been told a little differently?

But she did marry the prince, and eventually she became queen. The Brothers Grimm—palace apol ogists, both of them—turned her story inside out and made her the heroine of the tale.

Don't get me wrong, she wasn't all bad, either, but I think it's time we set the record straight, in the name of justice for stepparents everywhere.

Being anyone’s second wife isn’t an easy task, and it’s even harder if the first wife died tragically, surrounded by her loving family. No matter what you do, you’re going to spend the rest of your life in that shadow.

Not that I’m bitter, mind you, because I’m really not. I just want a little respect, is all.

If I had known, before I married the duke, the way things would end . . . well, I would have married him anyway.

There weren’t many career paths for a widow with two daughters, after all. The only job skills I had involved husband-catching, and when my first husband died, I tightened my corset and set about finding another. I had my daughters to take care of.

The night I met the duke was magical. The royal palace—we met at a royal ball—was lit by thousands of candles, hanging from chandeliers, standing between platters on the heavy wooden banquet tables, and tucked into niches cut in the stone walls. Despite the chill in the outside air, the ballroom felt warm in the candlelight.

That night I thought the musicians must be angels, their music too beautiful to be the product of mere mortals. Mutton tasted like ambrosia. The men were more handsome, the women more beautiful, than any I had seen.

Clearly, I was smitten.

I really thought I had met the partner of my dreams, that when he made me his wife, I would be his other half. He promised to consult me, to heed my advice,

and to be a father to my poor, orphaned daughters, Catherine and Anne.

Not that I'm bitter, mind you. I just want people to know the truth.

He made a lot of promises.

So, I married him, and the girls and I left my late husband's family home. Just as well, since his brother had taken over.

I had gone from running the household and supervising the estate and the tenant farmers to being a barely tolerated interloper. My former in-laws were a real piece of work, I can tell you, but that's another story.

When I met my new daughter (the whole step-daughter thing came later, and it wasn't my idea, you know), I saw past her red-rimmed eyes and unkempt appearance. She had been without a mother for two years, and the duke didn't know how to care for a child. She just needed someone to take care of her.

What I saw, underneath the tangled hair and dirty clothes, was a bright intelligence and an instinct for survival.

I should have been wary of both, but my heart went out to this little waif-child with the forlorn look. I may have been a sucker, but this kid had potential. With the right training, she could run the kingdom.

That much, at least, I got right.

My girls, I'm afraid, suffered by comparison. Oh, they were both very pretty, just like I was at their ages. They knew how to dress well, as long as there was enough money for seamstresses and shoemak ers, and how to supervise a

household staff. They were graceful dancers and could carry on with the kind of pleasantries that said nothing and offended no one.

They would make very good wives someday.

Within days of moving into the castle, I began to see how badly things had been let go after the duke's first wife died. Not only had Cynthia, my new daughter, been neglected, but the castle had been allowed to run down, and the servants had become a rebellious, slovenly bunch.

I thought my husband could use some help.

Our first arugment, prophetically enough, was about Cynthia.

"She should be better dressed," I said.

"Why? She spends most of her time with the cook in the kitchen, she'd only ruin anything better." The duke shoveled in another pile of turnips and glared at me.

I tried to appeal to his parental pride. "But she's a lovely child. She should have clothes that are as pretty as she is." They say clothes make the man, and that goes double, or maybe triple, for women. You have to dress the part, and she was wearing servant's rags.

"Dress her as you will," the duke said, waving a hand at me. "Just be careful of your spending. I'm not made out of money, you know."

I hesitated, but he had promised to heed my advice. "I'll see that she gets

proper clothes. And there are ways your estate could be more profitable. Perhaps we could talk about it. Later."

I gave him what I thought was a seductive smile. We were newlyweds, after all, and that should have made him happy. My mistake.

"I doubt I'll need the help of a woman to make my estate profitable. Tend to the household, like a good wife, and leave the rest to me."

He bent over his plate, effectively cutting off any chance of discussion. It was the first time he had dismissed me so quickly, but it was far from the last.

Cynthia wasn't any easier to deal with than her father.

I called her to my chamber the next day, where I waited with a trunk of clothes my older girls had outgrown.

"Cynthia, come look at what I have here." I tried to be as nonthreatening as I could. I didn't intend to replace her mother. Really, I didn't. I just wanted to help, but you can't help some people.

"Your father and I are going to order you some new dresses." I tried not to look at the gray rags she wore, stained with soot and God-knew-what from the kitchen. "But the dressmakers will need some time to get them ready. In the meantime, I thought you might find something in here you would like."

My late husband had never denied his girls anything, and that trunk was packed with gorgeous clothes. Silks and laces, fine brocades, in rich blues and greens. They were more suited to my fair-haired older girls than to this dark-eyed youngster, but they were beautiful clothes.

Cynthia refused to look in the trunk. She wouldn't try on any of the dresses, and she clung stubbornly to her ragged skirt and tunic. "These are my clothes," she said. "I have no need of charity."

"They aren't charity, child. They're just clothes your sisters have outgrown." I tried to get closer, the way you try to sidle up to a wary animal, but she was having none of it.

"They aren't my sisters. And you aren't my mother."

She ran out of my chamber and refused to leave her room for three days. Of course the servants sided with her, smuggling food in to her, and warning her every time I came by.

I know the story claims she had no clothes besides that single ragged skirt and tunic, but the truth is, there was an entire room filled with the work of seamstresses.

I think they were eventually given to charity.

So there I was. My so-called job skills had captured another husband, but he wasn't the man I thought he was. His idea of consulting me was to ask what I wanted cook to prepare for lunch. Not dinner—that was always his choice.

As for being a father to my daughters, he figured if there was food on the table and a roof overhead, he was good.

I watched my three daughters growing up. Catherine and Anne would marry well enough and be content with their lots. Cynthia, though, was too stubborn for her own good.

She still wouldn’t wear the clothes I had made for her, and she continued to sleep in the kitchen. Not that I blamed her for that. It was the only place in the entire castle that was warm, and there were nights I would have joined her, but I didn’t dare. She was the only one the cook would tolerate.

She was always the darling of the servants.

When the invitation came for the prince’s ball, the entire household fell apart. Catherine and Anne were absolutely convinced they would catch the prince’s eye, and they fought between themselves constantly over which one of them would be queen. I thought their chances were good—they had been well-trained—but I knew the competition would be fierce.

We spent long days preparing for the big night.

I invited Cynthia to join us. “You could attend the ball,” I said. “We could go as a family.”

Wrong thing to say.

“I’m not part of your family,” she said. Like I said, she was a stubborn child, and she had long ago decided we weren’t related.

The older girls were fitted for their gowns. They practiced walking and curtsying in their new shoes and fussed over their jewelry and hair. This was their chance to capture the heart of the prince.

There were times when I knew Cynthia was eavesdropping on us as we prepared. I would hear steps outside my chamber or in the gallery above the hall

where the girls practiced their dance steps. When I turned to look, all I could see was the tail of a tattered gray skirt. But I knew she was listening.

I’m sure Catherine and Anne though I had lost my mind, when I talked to them about ambition, since neither of them actually suffered from an abundance. But they weren’t my real audience.

The night of the ball arrived, and Cynthia still refused to attend with us. She claimed that she had nothing fit to wear, as if that were my fault.

I considered, for just a moment, staying home with her, and trying, one last time, to get through to her. But then I looked at Catherine and Anne, dressed and waiting. At least I could help them.

Wrong again.

We arrived in front of the castle in the middle of a long line of carriages. Footmen, decked out in their finest livery, helped us down from our coach and onto the carpet rolled out on the broad stone steps. At the door, a herald announced each arrival.

The main ballroom was a swirl of light and color. Candles flickered everywhere, as they had the night I met the duke. The light reflected from satin gowns in every color of the rainbow and glinted off lavish displays of jewels. Every woman of marriga ble age in the land was there. Except Cynthia, of course.

There was a feast spread across the banquet tables. The aroma of roast beef mingled with the sweet musk of mulled wine, and piles of honey-drizzled cakes added the smell of clover.

It was more spectacular than I could have imagined, and Catherine and Anne were quickly caught up in the dancing, as I watched from the edge of the room. I had taught them all I could. Now all I could do was watch.

They were doing just fine, and Catherine was next on the prince's dance card, when trouble appeared at the door in the form of a dark-haired beauty dressed in an exquisite gown of rose-colored satin and dainty gold slippers.

The men, all of them, stared, and the herald wasn't even able to speak her name. She glided into the room on those gold slippers, and the prince abandoned Catherine to rush to her side.

He never left her side, and danced with her the rest of the evening. We all knew his search was over.

In one way, it was better for Anne. I saw her dancing with a rather dashing young count, and she was clearly practicing those husband-catching job skills. She would be fine.

The wine flowed, the music played, the prince danced with his newfound love. The king and queen looked on, obviously pleased that their son had found someone.

It looked like happily ever after was just around the corner.

Until the clock began to strike midnight.

The beautiful stranger—we never had heard her name—tore herself away from the prince and ran for the door. He ran after her, yelling for his guards to

stop her, but she dodged them.

She didn’t stop, didn’t even say good-bye. She ran out of the castle, leaving behind one tiny gold slipper.

The prince searched the entire kingdom, looking for the woman who fit that gold slipper. It was small and delicate, and there weren’t many girls who could even come close to wearing it.

No matter how they tried, neither Catherine nor Anne could fit more than a couple toes into it. I think Anne was actually relieved, since the count she had met at the ball had already begun to court her, but Catherine was disappointed.

The search party was ready to leave our castle when Cynthia came out of the kitchen. She just stood in the corner, near the fire, but the prince caught sight of her and looked back and forth between her and the duke.

“My daughter,” the duke said. “But she didn’t attend the ball. She can’t be the girl you’re looking for.”

The prince insisted, and of course the slipper fit.

I knew it would.

The prince wanted Cynthia to accompany him to the castle immediately, and she quickly agreed.

“I have searched for days to find you,” he told her, “and I can’t live without you another day.”

Cynthia looked at me, smiling. It was the last time she spoke directly to me.

“A smart woman disguises her ambition.”

Cynthia married the prince, of course. I knew all along that she would, since it was the only way she could run the kingdom. And no matter what she says, she learned a lot from me. Of course, she has the prince—he’s the king now—so completely enchanted that he lets her do pretty much whatever she wants. I like to think of that as my legacy.

As for me, I have a little place in the countryside. Her Highness takes care of the bills and leaves me alone. I think she expects me to stay here and keep her secrets, and for the most part that’s what I’ve done.

But before I die, I wanted to tell the whole story.

I’m not bitter. Really.

TSONOQUA

Nathaniel Poole

Nathaniel Poole lives in an old house in the middle of nowhere with two cats, a Yorkshire terrier, three teenagers, and a wife. It's possible one of the cats understands him, but he isn't sure just yet.

She first heard the movement in the hallway, a sound like a mouse in a wall. She sat on the edge of her stained yellow sofa and stared at the door.

The unexpected knock made her jump.

"Tsonoqua, I know you are in there," said a voice, old and shrill. A woman's voice. But Tsonoqua had no intention of replying.

She lived in the *Raven View* apartments, a dilapidated building on the outskirts of Sandspit, on the archipelago of *Haida Gwaii*, a tumble of fog-shrouded islandsoff the northwest coast of British Columbia. Her buzzer was labeled *Sonja Qua*, and it had never been rung. She paid her bills on time, never asked for anything from the super. No one had any business with her.

"Go away," Tsonoqua growled.

"You just let me in," the woman in the hallway said, and then with lowered voice added, "If you don't open this door right now, I will tell everyone who you are. I will inform the authorities."

Tsonoqua's hackles rose. Who was this mortal to threaten *her*? She jumped from her couch, cringing at a sudden stab up her back. *Be gentle*, she admonished herself. *You're not young anymore.*

Shuffling toward the door, she opened it a crack, saw a tiny old Haida woman standing in the hall, clutching a black purse in arthritic hands. Her gray hair hung in braids about her narrow shoulders, and her brown eyes glittered in a face scarred by smallpox. Her left foot was turned inwards.

"Yes?" Tsonoqua rasped.

"May I come in?" the old woman asked in an impatient tone. She obviously thought this nonsense had gone on long enough.

Tsonoqua's talons clenched.

"What do you *want?*" Tsonoqua demanded.

Without answering, the old woman pushed past her into the apartment. The room was tiny, with peeling gray linoleum and pale green wallpaper blackened in the corners by mold. A single overhead lamp without its globe, orbited by several lazy bluebottles. The apartment smelled like cold decay.

Except for the sofa, a worn bureau (where Tsonoqua kept her prized collection of children's bones) and a tiny, black-and-white television, there was no other furniture.

"There, that's better. Now we can talk."

Tsonoqua slammed the door. "What is there to talk about, woman? Why have

you disturbed me like this?”

“My name is Alice, Alice Thompson,” she replied.

“Is that so. Then I have consumed many of your ancestors.”

“Do you have any tea?” asked Alice sweetly.

Tsonoqua gaped at her. *Tea? Who does this woman think I am? I am Tsonoqua, The Wild Woman Of the Woods! I do not serve tea!* But then she saw she was missing *Who Wants to be a Millionaire,* and groaned aloud. “Yes,” she said, holding her head in frustration. “One cup of tea, as long as you are quick about it.”

“Of course,” said Alice. This won’t take ten minutes of your time, dear.”

Sipping her tea, Alice watched the immortal with an appraising eye. “You’re not what I expected,” she said delicately. Tsonoqua felt hurt, but she knew the old woman was right; she wasn’t herself anymore. There was a time when she was a giant of a being, and the People shivered in their villages at the sound of her footfalls, her terrifying cries.

But that was a long time ago. Before the *Others* came. Now she was barely seven feet tall, wrinkled and hunched over; from a distance she looked like any other old crone, a shadow of the monster she once was.

“Is that why you are here? To mock me?”

“Not at all, dear. I came because I need your help. The People need your help. I discovered you quite by accident; I was visiting a friend in the building when I felt the same feeling I had when I was a young and foolish girl, wandering away from my village and dreaming of love.

“I remember; I almost had you back then, but you escaped me.”

“Yes, something frightened me, and I ran swiftly to the village. My parents had always warned us: Don’t go into the forest or the *Tsonoqua* will get you. Don’t go salmon fishing by yourself or the *Tsonoqua* will get you. If you’re a bad girl, the *Tsonoqua* will come and take you away.”

“That was my purpose. To carry off and consume the disobedient and malignant.”

“Yes, and because of the fear of you, the villages were calm and safe. Children were well behaved. But the youth no longer obey the elders and instead involve themselves in wickedness. That is why you must return.”

The monster gripped her skinny knees with her claws. “What is there to return to? I remember watching as the People succumbed to the smallpox, saw them stagger drunk to be lost in the forest, screaming like the spirits they were not. I heard the tears of the children as they were herded away like animals by the *Others*.

“And after the People were gone, the trees began falling, the forests were burned and cut. The many spirits of mists and water, of cedar, rock and moss could flee, but I, being incarnate, was left behind to wither.”

“Not all the People joined the Great Spirit, Tsonoqua.”

“Perhaps not, but I have become as you see me. I can do nothing.”

Alice’s eyes narrowed. “My grandson was killed this week. Murdered by terrible men who run wild among my people. We cannot continue to live this way!” Her hands were shaking and a tear slid down her old face. “You must help

us!”

But Tsonoqua turned away and silently faced her television. Alice stared at the grotesque back for some time before collecting her purse and heading for the door.

“You belong to the people, Tsonoqua, even though you have forgotten this. Indeed, I think you have forgotten yourself.”

They crashed into her apartment just as her show was starting, a pair of youths clad in identical black leather jackets that squeaked as they moved. But Tsonoqua was in no mood to be disturbed. Not twice in one week. She turned her dark eyes upon them.

“Depart, or die!” she growled.

“Holy shit, bro, that’s one ugly old bitch!”

“You keep your mouth shut lady. No screamin’. Just give us your money and we’ll leave you alone.”

Tsonoqua hissed at them.

“Jesus, Stitches, listen to that old biddy.”

“Give us the money, lady,” the second thief warned. “*Now!*”

Tsonoqua had consumed many like him—young Haida filled with foolish and reckless bravado. She reached for him with her talons. The thief pulled out a pistol, whipping her across the face. She spun careening against the wall,

crimson drops of her blood stippling the wallpaper.

"Now you just lie there, cow!" shouted Stitches, standing over her. "Hurry, Dutchy, look through her shit."

"There's nothin' here man; the ol' bitch's got nothin'."

"Grab that TV."

At this Tsonoqua struggled to get up. "*No* . . ."

"Don't you move! I swear by Christ I'll let you have it again!" She cringed back against the wall.

"Got it, man, let's get outta here."

"Move and you die, bitch," said Stitches. The two men backed out of the room.

Soon Alice poked her head through the door; several people in the building had been robbed, and she knew immediately what had happened. She knelt down beside Tsonoqua, who was curled in a ball on the floor. Gently she took the monster's head in her hands. In her shame, Tsonoqua tried to turn away, but Alice held her firmly.

Although now more human than monster, the face was still unbelievably ugly, with small, black eyes, a flaring nose and pursed lips. A long mane of gray hair hung across her face like rotting seaweed. It was caked with blood. Alice grabbed a handkerchief from her purse and, moistening it with a drop of spittle, carefully dabbed away at the weal on Tsonoqua's cheek.

“So, now you understand?” asked Alice.

Wrapping her in a blanket, she brought the monster across town to the reservation of Skidegate, where she had her little cottage on the water.

Her home was small and tidy, with doilies scattered over every surface, lace curtains undulating over open windows. The sills and tables were decorated with potted flowers in jam cans; there were several porcelain frogs. A cedar *Tsonoqua* mask hung on a wall. The house smelled like dried salmon and cookies.

“There you go my dear. This will help you feel better.” She handed Tsonoqua a glass of cold water from her refrigerator.

The monster sipped it. “Why are you doing this?” she whispered.

“I told you, we need your help. Surely you must see that now.”

Tsonoqua shook her head. “I—I cannot help. I am nothing.” A tear slid down the hideous cheek.

“I wonder . . . you are still Tsonoqua. This makes no sense.” She sat down with an orange tabby in her lap. Thoughtfully, she stroked it’s back. The monster did not reply.

“When I was a child, we were told to stay in the village, that you were powerless to reach us there.”

“My strength remained only within the forest.”

“So that must be it! You have lived outside the forest for many years now, and the forest is your source of power.”

Tsonoqua brightened a moment, and then her face fell. “The forest is cut. I remember the great trees falling, and there is only waste. There are roads, there are men.”

“A long time has passed since the Whites first came to *Haida Gwaii*. Things have changed. Anyway, we must try. Put away your tears, Tsonoqua, we must go and find your strength!”

They pulled off the main highway and onto a gravel road that led to an old cutblock high in the mountains. As they ascended, Tsonoqua felt herself renewed, felt vigor return to her ancient limbs. She was amazed to see that the forest had indeed returned, verdant and strong.

“Stop!” she cried. Alice stomped on the brakes, a cloud of dust billowing about them. Tsonoqua stared with wonder out her window. There was a cedar of enormous girth, somehow missed by a logger’s whipsaw a hundred years ago. She flung open the car door and hurried up to the tree; trembling, she reached her arms around it.

The cedar tree was the cradle of her spirit, and as she clung to it’s ribboned bark, she felt the power of it’s life enter her.

“HOO, HOO,” she cried joyously, the call echoing among the trees. Behind her Alice got out of the car.

“Go on,” she whispered.

"HOO, HOO," cried Tsonoqua again, and without a word, she turned and ran into the forest.

Alice didn't see the *Tsonoqua* after that, nor did she hear her eerie call again. And the village's ruf fians were as busy as ever, raising hell on the reserve at Skidegate as well as in the nearby town of Sandspit. But she remained convinced something was going to happen, she could feel it in her old bones.

They followed the winding road out of the mountains, Jimmy staring out the window at the dark forest slipping past, listening to the gravel grumble and rattle beneath them. They had spent the day in the high country, harvesting huckleberries with an ice-cream pail and shooting rabbits with the youngster's twenty-two.

"Can you finish telling me about the *Tsonoqua*?" Jimmy asked. "You said it was best to wait till we got back to the car."

"Tsonoqua is the Wild Woman of the Woods," Alice replied slowly. "She searches the forest for disobedient children to capture and eat. She is sixteen feet high, with swinging breasts that she throws over her shoulders when she runs, and a mane of scraggly black hair. Her eyes are like fire, and she cries *'Hooo, Hooo'* as she crashes through the trees. She wears a necklace made from the bones of slain children, and her breath reeks of carrion. Once she has her claws on you, you are dead."

"But why does she eat children?" Jimmy asked, shivering in his seat.

"Because one wayward person can destroy the whole clan, my child. If a naughty boy wanders off, or misbehaves, or does not follow the rules, not only is he in danger, but so are those around him. The forest and the sea are fruitful, but they are also unforgiving. The People can only survive when we put the needs of others before our own."

Jimmy thought about this a long time.

“I’m a good boy, right, Grandma?” he finally asked, and she was glad to hear the fear in his voice. She reached over and tousled his untidy black mop. “You’re a good boy,” she said, and smiled. “But some boys are not.”

They continued their descent on the logging road in silence, until Jimmy saw a sign sweep past them in the dark.

“Grandma, shouldn’t you have turned there?” he asked, looking behind at the cloud of dust glowing red in their taillights.

“Nonsense. I know where I am going. I’ve driven these roads countless times.”

But soon Alice realized that Jimmy had been right; the road twisted and veered in unexpected ways, and soon they found themselves at a fork she didn’t remember.

“I told you—”

“Be quiet!” She was preparing to turn around when a pair of headlights appeared in her rearview mirror. They pulled up close behind her, and she heard the slamming of doors. The barrel of a rifle appeared in her window.

“Get out,” commanded a voice.

“So whatehell are you doin’ up here?” the man asked through a bandanna that

covered most of his face. It was dark inside the Jeep, and the light from the dash threw shadows that made the two men sitting in the front seat grotesque and frightening. The rifle was pointed at Jimmy's chest.

"That's Billy Thomson's grandma," the other man muttered.

"I don't know what this is about, but we got lost," said Alice, her lips set in a thin line.

"You didn't see the *no trespassin'* sign back there? Huh?"

"I saw it, Grandma," said Jimmy, trying to sound brave. Alice pulled him closer. "Hush, Jimmy! No, I didn't see it, but that doesn't give you the right to treat us like this."

"I tell you, Stitches, she knows somethin'. She knows about th' dope."

"Shut up, jerk." The man started the Jeep; they pulled forward, swinging violently around Alice's car.

"Wait, what are you doing? Where are you taking us?"

"You're coming with us until I figger out what th' hell to do with you."

Tsonoqua peered out from between a pair of young cedars at the clearing. Bright stars swung overhead, and there was a full moon. The air was filled with a sweet, cloying scent, and the open space before her rustled with rows of some strange plant glowing in the pale moonlight

She had spent the last few weeks among the old villages, *Q'ona and T'aanuu,*

Hlk'yaah GaawGa, *Gandle K'in*, and *Sgang Gwaii*. Up and down *Haida Gwaii* she had wandered, seeking out the old places that once dotted both coasts of the Islands. To her grief she had found each village deserted, the survivors of the plagues having abandoned them long ago.

Since the creation of the world she had watched over the People, tending them, culling only when necessary, as an act of love. But now, as she had feared, there seemed to be no one left.

Lonely and confused she had headed north, back to Skidegate, back to Alice.

The sound of a vehicle increased in volume, and Tsonoqua shrank back against the trees. Lights bounced and flashed among the strange plants. The engine quit, and she heard the sound of doors slamming. Voices.

Young men's voices. An old woman.

With a start, Tsonoqua recognized Alice. She left the shelter of the forest and began approaching, hidden in the plantation.

"Run, Jimmy, *run!*" the old woman's voice shrieked. The report of a rifle rang out, and Tsonoqua cowered deeper among the plants. There was a commotion, and the sound of someone running her way. A young boy burst through the thick greenery and skidded to a stop.

He stared at her wide-eyed. "You're not sixteen feet tall!" he cried, and fainted.

Tsonoqua bent down to the still child, and her mouth watered. It had been so

long, and she was desperately, ravenously hungry. This misbehaving morsel would taste wonderfully sweet; she had consumed many for the crime of running off.

But her heart told her that something was wrong. Leaving Jimmy behind, she edged closer to the headlights.

“Hey, Stitches, where is that flashlight?”

“It’s under the seat. Hurry up, you gotta find that goddamn kid.”

“You leave him alone,” cried Alice.

“Screw you, bitch. Dutchy, get out there!”

“I found it.” a narrow beam of light cut a wavering path through the plants.

“No! Jimmy!” Alice screamed, and there was the sound of a blow. Picking up the child, Tsonoqua ran toward the safety of the trees; she remembered the names, what these youths had done to her back in her apartment.

“Old hag. I’ll give you somethin’ to shut you up; somethin’ you ain’t had in a goddamn while.”

The light moved up and down the rows of plants rustling in the night wind. “Where the hell’s that kid?” Dutchy muttered to himself.

A cry cut through the clearing, a sound of pain and despair, the sound of a soul being torn away. Tsonoqua froze. More then the cry of a woman being violated, it was the sound of the rape of a people, the misery and despair of a thousand voices as they descended into darkness.

At that sound a rage flared inside her, the way a lightning fire will detonate when it encounters dry tinder. Her massive, knobbled toes dug deeper into the earth, carving great furrows. Energy flowed from the surrounding trees and moss, from the grasses and lichen and fungi. From the insects and voles and shrews and worms. From the granite of the earth itself.

All about her everything wilted, and as the plants succumbed, she grew ever more enormous, her head crashing through the overstory of the forest. Her arms thickened, toes gripped the earth like stone escarpments. She threw her head back and let out a cry, *"HOO, HOO!"* that shook the leaves from the alders and cottonwoods, loosened pebbles on a scree slope half a mile away.

Out in the plantation the flashlight froze.

"What was *THAT*?!" both men cried in unison. The ground began vibrating.

Dutchy looked up to see a shadow cover the stars, and he was crushed flat before he could an nunciate the *Oh, shit* that was forming in his mind.

Hearing the thunder of approaching footfalls, Stitches scrambled off of his victim, fled tripping and stumbling down the road. Tsonoqua caught him in less then a heartbeat. His screams lasted only a moment.

Alice lay quietly on the road, staring at a star. The rape hadn't been the first for her, and she wondered how she would survive another. Tsonoqua had been too late. But at least there wouldn't be a next time, of that she was sure. There wouldn't be a next time for anyone.

The ground shook again as Tsonoqua passed beside her, hunched over, long

arms dragging her quarry. There wasn't much left of him, and Alice was amazed to see he was still alive, his pleading eyes meeting hers as his head bounced along through the gravel.

That was going to help a lot, she thought.

Alice sat on her rocker on her front porch, listening to the lap of surf. It was quiet in the village that evening, as it had been for a long while. The thugs and gangsters, drug dealers and bullies had all but disappeared; no one knew where they had gone, and no one cared.

Some claimed that the *Tsonoqua* had returned, that they had heard her calls echoing in the forest. A few scoffed at this, but they soon disappeared as well; all agreed that something both eerie and miraculous had happened.

Several times Tsonoqua had stopped by Alice's for tea, tapping on her door in the early hours of the morning, each time looking wilder than the last. Eventually she stopped coming at all; she had become a creature of the forest, and Alice knew she would never see her again.

As long as she behaved; after all, it was the same for all of them.

The *Tsonoqua* was watching.

BANISHED

Jane Toombs

Jane Toombs, published both in print and pixels, has eighty books and fifteen short stories or novellas to her credit. She writes in every genre except men's action and erotica, though her favorite is paranormal. 2005 books include: *The Hugger Doll*, a horror novel out in May from *http://www.doubledragonpublis-hing.com/* also in May, "Gambling Trouble" a short story in *The Trouble With Romance* (Trouble being a black cat) from *http://www.treblehearts.com/; High Risk*, a thriller, out in June from *http://www.champagneb-ooks.com/* "The Turquoise Mask", a fantasy short story in *Tales From The Treasure Trove I* from *http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com/*. Jane, and the Viking from her past, enjoy living on the south shore of Lake Superior in the warm months and among the lakes in mid-Florida in the cold months. Their calico grandcat, Kinko, prefers the northern location—better hunting.

Erda glared through her kitchen window at the moon, plumply full. Not red, nor blue like the moons she was used to on Shuniah. Another minus, even though she could feel its pull. Which was a wonder, considering her diminished powers.

"Your choice," the High Council had told her. "Removal of *all* your powers or banishment."

As if there *were* any choice. Stripped of all power, life on Shuniah would be impossible. She'd chosen banishment even though she had no choice of where she'd be sent. Bad enough it had been to a primitive planet, worse that her powers had been "adjusted" to fit the planet's culture—no more than a pale imitation of those she once owned. She'd even been deprived of her life companion, a Shuniah ahver that clung to her shoulder everywhere she went.

Banished and diminished, just because she'd broken a few rules. Nothing could possibly be worse than this. Erda scowled at the pale moon until a whine of fear and pain filtered through to her. When she opened the door, the sensation grew clearer. Animal. Wolf. Right front leg broken, held fast in a trap. About time. She was overdue for a familiar, as they called companions in this dismal place. Like the wolf, she was trapped here forever. Unlike the wolf, she was not in her prime.

Though she'd been considered attractive on Shuniah, her guise on this planet was that of a juices-dried old woman. She resented this, even though she knew it hadn't been on purpose. The old body had been the one available at the time of the transfer. Even the Council, powerful though they were, had to find a body balanced on the verge of death to usurp it for a banishment transfer. Of course, once she was thrust inside, she'd healed her body. Old, yes, but healthy.

She reached for a jacket and ventured into the night. Mid-May, they called it here. Spring, but cold all the same in this forsaken wilderness they'd chosen for her—the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Focusing on the pain-filled mental cry, she headed through the pines toward its source.

I come, she told the wolf. *Erda will help you escape, Erda will heal you, Erda will make you her true companion.*

Not from compassion, but a wild beast had no knowledge of compassion anyway. And she'd been born without any.

The wolf lay in the deep woods near a patch of snow left over from the cold months, gnawing on the flesh of his trapped right front leg, the bone shattered by the trap. He snarled as she crouched near him, then snapped at her when she touched his head. Once her hand met his silver-gray fur, he quieted.

I name you Silver and, by my touch, I claim you as mine, she transmitted. *I am Erda. I will free you and ease the pain.*

A rustle of dead leaves brought her to her feet. Something coming—no someone, she sensed a person. Erda slipped into the shadow of a pine.

A man, tall and broad, with a short black beard, stepped into the small clearing. When he saw the wolf, he stopped.

“Got you, you murdering bastard,” he muttered. “My dog’s the last one you’ll ever kill.”

Hackles rising, the wolf growled low in his throat.

Blackbeard, slid a rifle from his shoulder and aimed at the wolf’s head.

If she still had her Shuniah body, she might have used the power of it to deflect the man’s purpose. She enjoyed a good lay as much as any other woman. But this was here, not there. “Hold it!” she commanded, stepping into view.

Gaping at her, Blackbeard lowered the rifle. “Who the devil are you?”

“Erda. And the wolf is mine.”

He gave a snort of laughter and took aim once again.

No one messed with what belong to Erda! She blasted him, taking a great deal of pleasure in breaking his right leg when he fell, screaming, a yard away.

Ignoring Blackbeard, she crouched again to use her healing power on the wolf, finishing what he’d begun with his chewing. Once she’d cut through the

remaining flesh of his foreleg, releasing him from the trap, she closed off the ragged, bleeding wound, sending a message to his brain to stop all pain impulses. Ending with a command to the stump to begin to repair the damage by building a new foreleg, she rose. A flick of dismissive power disposed of the trap and the fragment of broken leg. Another flick erased Blackbeard's memory of her.

Come, Silver, she ordered. Turning her back on the cursing, whimpering man, she headed home, the wolf trailing her, awkward on three legs.

A week later, though Silver's new leg had grown strong enough to support his weight, his yellow eyes still held no warmth for her. By the Unforgiving Mind of the Great Mother, how she hated this place! In Shuniah any animal would be proud to be chosen as her companion. Not here. Not this wild creature whose life she'd saved, and provided with a new foreleg as well. Still, what could be expected from the beasts of a primitive planet whose people could think of no more appropriate name than Earth?

Naturally the wolf obeyed her. She controlled him; he had no choice. But he didn't like her, sensing her difference—something alien contained in an Earth body. No matter. He was hers to command. Together they'd already searched the nearby woods for what she craved—without finding a trace of it. Even Blackbeard had vanished. Mistreating the man had awakened a need in her. Not for sex, though she wouldn't turn away from an offer that appealed to her. Still, she well knew what she really longed for—something difficult to suss out here in what the natives called "the sticks." She'd have to make a trip to town. The denser the population, the easier to sense evil. Pure evil was rare, but even pseudo evil might be diverting.

Going to town meant using the car that had come with her cabin. She knew how to drive it, because this body she wore had been programmed for living on Earth. That didn't mean she had to *like* driving an ancient fossil-fuel vehicle. She'd leave the wolf at home.

Town, a cluttered jangle of stores and houses, had a small park across from the courthouse. At the west end, children played on slides and swings. She chose a bench fairly close, settled onto it and released her inner sense to search. A taint of evil drifted from a man descending the courthouse steps, so she scanned him. Deception and treachery involving a legal case. She shook her head. Small potatoes.

Some time later, finding nothing intriguing, she was about to move on when she sensed a cloud of blackness approaching. Avidly flicking her gaze from one person on the sidewalk to another, Edra identified the source—a big man with bushy white hair who appeared younger than she sensed him to be. He headed west, toward her, the children his obvious quarry. She sent a probe and smiled. Evil incarnate. She'd found what she craved.

As he approached, she used her power to plant thoughts in his mind. *You see something in me you need. A chance to come close to a child. Believe that one of those on the playground is my granddaughter.*

The man stopped and met her gaze, smiling. His clear blue eyes showed nothing of his dark thoughts. "May I share your bench?"

He didn't know it yet, but soon they'd share much more.

"Why, I suppose so," she said, faking hesitation.

"I'm harmless."

Edra ventured a smile. "Shall we exchange names? Mine is Mary Smith. I like to come here and watch my daughter's little girl." She nodded toward the swings.

"What a coincidence—my name is Smith, too. Henry Smith. Which child

belongs to you?”

Henry was correct, but his last name was as much a fake as both of hers.

“Try to guess. Which little girl do you think she is?”

He replied with no hesitation. “The girl with curly blond hair in the pink jacket.”

So that’s the one he’d chosen. After concentrating on the child for a moment, Edra turned to him and widened her eyes. “Why, however did you guess?”

Henry leaned toward her. “She’s as pretty as you are.”

Edra simpered, wondering if he actually believed she swallowed the false flattery. Then she waited for the child to do what she’d suggested.

“Look, she’s waving at us,” Harry said.

They both waved back.

“What’s her name?” he asked.

She’d gotten enough from the child to be able to say, “Cindy. She’s seven.”

Edra hadn’t planted a lure, so she was surprised when Cindy jumped off the swing and started toward them. As he’d said, a pretty child, dressed in jeans, a white shirt with a lopsided red heart on it showing under her open jacket. Edra stared at the heart, a niggling in her mind that refused to surface.

“Ready to leave, Cindy?” Edra asked.

The girl blinked at her, then was distracted by Henry pulling a candy bar from his pocket and offering it.

“For you,” he said, smiling.

Cindy shook her head. “I’m not supposed to take anything from a man I don’t know. Thanks anyway.”

“But your grandmother knows me.”

Poised to flee, she stared from him to Edra and back, poised to flee. “I have to go home for lunch now.”

“Do you come here often?” he asked.

Cindy pointed to a two-story brick house across the street. “I live there, so I get to come to the park all the time.”

“My name is Mr. Smith,” he said. “So now you do know me. Next time we meet, you can accept my candy.”

“Maybe.” She turned, tossed a “’Bye,” over her shoulder and scampered away.

Edra, intent on assessing Henry’s dark thoughts, hadn’t really probed the girl. Not that it mattered. Cindy’s actions labeled her as a likely victim. A lure Edra intended to use to capture Henry.

“I feel a trifle dizzy,” she told him. “Perhaps you’d be kind enough to see me to my car.” As she spoke, she planted agreement in his mind.

“I imagine Cindy visits you often,” he said as he walked with her to the parking lot.

“Not as often as I’d like.” She made a great fuss of getting into her car and fumbling for the key, aware since he posed as a gentleman, he’d feel obliged to offer more help.

“I’d best follow behind in my car to make sure you reach home safely.”

“How kind of you.”

Once home, she maneuvered him into helping her get inside. He tensed at the sight of Silver.

“You have a wolf!”

“Dear me, no. Just a dog.”

He eyed Silver uneasily, and Edra used his distraction to plant the necessary idea into his mind, making sure to stress “alive.” She watched him drive away with satisfaction. He knew where she lived now and would do as she’d told him. Henry was as much her victim as Cindy would be his.

Because she didn’t like children, Edra had never been tempted to reproduce, though some of Shuniah’s other sorceresses did have a child or two. Daughters all, of course, annoying everyone with their immature, untrained talents until old enough to be taken from their mothers and schooled by the domas. Until that

time, the mothers had to put up with the restriction of caring for their daughters. Definitely not for her—she cherished her freedom.

Not liking children didn't necessarily mean she wanted Cindy to die. She might be a dark sorceress who'd been banished for inadmissible evil acts, but that didn't make her an out and out monster. Of course the girl would be traumatized, but her memories could be erased with a mind wipe. Without a victim, Henry's darkness would remained locked within him. He'd be of no use to Edra, no use at all.

"Very soon, Silver," she murmured. "Very soon, we'll have superb entertainment."

He stared at her with his inimical yellow eyes. It she hadn't been a sorceress, she'd be afraid of this wolf she'd chosen as a companion. As it was, he made her uneasy. She'd make sure to teach him proper manners after Henry's visit. Was Henry the type to use knives? She thought it very likely. Blood was important to most rituals. The anticipation of his upcoming surprise warmed her down to her toenails, ugly-looking things that they were.

Two evenings later, when he finally drove up in his van, Erda sensed his confusion even before he parked beside the cottage. Henry's thoughts slithered through his mind like disoriented snakes as he fought the compulsion she'd infected him with. From his point of view it must seem her cottage would be the last place in the world to bring his victim, believing as he did that she was Cindy's grandmother.

Erda smiled. "You see what I can do, Silver?"

The wolf, crouched in the corner shadows, growled.

"None of that. You will not move or speak."

Her present powers might be puny compared to what they once had been, but Silver had to obey her, like it or not. And no Earth person could evade the compulsion spell she'd set on Henry. When she sensed him on her porch, she flung the door open.

"Do enter," she told Henry. "You and Cindy are more than welcome."

Bewilderment clouded his blue eyes as he stepped across the threshold carrying the child over his shoulder. Erda guided him to the daybed and he dumped Cindy there, her hands, feet and mouth duct-taped. She lay on her side, eyes closed. Erda's probe met the nothingness of an unconscious mind.

"Don't tell me you drugged her," she scolded.

Henry, who'd been looking about the room, stared at her blankly.

"Stop being dense. I'm not her grandmother. You must know by now I intend to participate. Tell me what you did to her."

He swallowed. "I don't use drugs." His gaze wandered again, searching. "Where's the dog?"

"Never mind about Silver. Why is Cindy like this?"

"When I grabbed her, she went limp. Hasn't come to since then."

"A faint, then. She'll come out of it soon. What do you plan to do first?"

He shook his head. "I can't do—that. Not with you watching."

Erda rolled her eyes. Switching her attention to Cindy, she dissolved the tape binding her. The girl didn't rouse as she slid onto her back, lying helpless before them.

"What the hell did you do to the tape?" Henry rasped the words.

"It doesn't matter. I assume you strip them naked first," Erda said, gazing at the heart emblem on Cindy's shirt. She frowned. Rather than being perfectly shaped, the red heart skewed to the left. What was it about the symbol that nibbled at her mind?

Suddenly aware of danger, she whirled to look at Henry. Standing over her, knife clutched in his hand, he stabbed down at her. "Mine," he muttered. "She's mine, you interfering old witch."

Erda deflected the knife with her power, but it grazed her forearm. He'd drawn first blood. "You miserable mortal," she cried, as blood dripped from the scratch.

He lunged at her, wild-eyed, but now she was ready, and the knife flew from his hand to land on the daybed next to Cindy.

Henry swerved toward the girl, his hand out to grab the knife again. Watching, him, ready to quell him with her power, Erda gasped. His hand, severed at the wrist, flopped onto the daybed. Blood spurted from the end of his arm, staining Cindy's clothes. The girl, knife in hand, laughed at Henry's screams and jumped off the daybed.

There was no way a seven-year-old Earth child could cut through bones like that, even with the sharpest knife. Erda backed away. "What are you?" she demanded.

“Help me, help me!” Henry shrieked as he clutched at his bleeding wrist.

“All right,” Cindy said. “It’s not time for you to bleed out. Yet.”

Erda was not surprised to see the blood stop spurting.

“There’s more cutting to be done,” Cindy told him. She glanced at Erda. “Want to help?”

At a loss for words, Erda didn’t reply.

“You’re good at holding spells, so you can keep him still,” Cindy said. “I’ll take care of the rest. The same as he meant to do to me.” She grimaced. “Except for the rape.”

Henry was now sprawled on the floor, apparently in shock.

Wary of whatever inhabited Cindy’s seven-year-old body, Erda nodded, considering total agreement the safest thing at this point. Besides, why make the evening a complete washout? What evil could do to evil fired her blood.

“He never once suspected me. They never do.” Radiating innocence, Cindy smiled at Henry. “And now he’s mine. All mine.”

Many hours later, Silver at her side, Erda used her power to excavate a grave among the pines. They placed what remained of Henry into the cavity, then buried him under the dirt they’d removed earlier. Erda sprinkled dead pine needles on top.

“What shall we say over him?” Cindy asked.

Since Henry had been an Earth person, Erda choose Earth symbolism, keeping it brief.

“Devil take this evil soul
We have buried in this hole.”

Cindy clapped her hands. “Perfect.”

As they returned to the cottage, Erda watched the wolf fawn over Cindy. “Silver is mine,” she warned.

“Ours.”

Enough of that! Erda stopped, reached for her power, and noticed how Cindy’s dark eyes glowed red in the pale moonlight. Her anger faded. Best to leave well enough alone for the moment. “I’ll drive you home,” she offered.

Cindy giggled, a remarkably chilling sound. “I don’t have a home. Yet.”

“You said you lived across from the park in town.”

“I lied.”

Apprehension shivered along Erda’s spine. “What do want from me?”

“Why, Grandmother, you shouldn’t have to ask.”

“I am no one’s grandmother.” Erda spit the words through her teeth. “I’ve never wanted a child, and you’re no exception.”

“I’ve chosen you to be my family. I didn’t know about you until last week, when I felt your power. And just in time. I’m only a child, so I need to be taken care of until I grow up, and not by just anyone. I read you there with the wolf and the man who wished to kill him, and knew you were what I needed. Aren’t you glad to be the lucky one?”

Erda snorted. “You’re no child. I asked you before—what are you? Who are you?”

“Earth bodies can’t be chosen, as you must know. Cindy is the name of the child’s body I’m in. You didn’t take your body’s name, but I intend to keep Cindy’s name. We’ll work out well together—you, me and Silver.” She stroked the wolf’s head.

“You’re not an Earthling and you’re certainly not from Shuniah. Where . . . ?”

“You really are provincial, Grandma Erda. Did you not know all the stellar civilizations use Earth as their dumping ground?”

Erda had never thought about it, but the idea seemed logical.

“So they dumped me here because I was a ba a-ad girl.” Cindy giggled again. “Sometime I’ll tell you all about it.”

Chilled, Erda started to ask again where the being inhabiting Cindy’a body was from then held, staring at the now-bloody shirt the girl wore, suddenly knowing the answer. The skewed heart on the shirt should have warned her from the beginning, for it mimicked the Crinoid symbol. Great Goddess, Cindy was one of *those.* One of the most powerful beings in the galaxy. Nothing could be kept secret from them. From Cindy.

“True, Grandma dear,” Cindy said.

Erda knew she had no choice. She was doomed to protect Cindy until the girl became an adult, to live out her life as Cindy dictated. What freedom she’d enjoyed on this miserable planet was at an end.

How wrong she’d been to believe there was no worse thing in her life than being banished . . .

SOUT TAKER

Lisa Silverthorne

Lisa Silverthorne has published nearly fifty short stories. She dreams of becoming a novelist and writes to discover the magic in ordinary things. Much of Lisa's inspiration is drawn from the Pacific Northwest and Puget Sound, where she journeys every year to greet the returning orca whales. Her first short fiction collection, *The Sound of Angels*, will appear this summer from Wildside Press. You can visit Lisa's website at: *http://www.drewes.org/*.

Soul taker. Demon of Death. The ancient names taunted Cela, Hera's curse old and stale but still holding her prisoner. Once a fair-haired goddess, she and her two sisters did Zeus' bidding—right or wrong. Of her sisters, she was the last. Doomed to bind her wings against her back and walk the earth like Zeus' mortals, hiding her haggish face and taloned feet.

Unless she broke the curse.

Early morning fog hung across Neah Bay, Washington, sheltering Cela among eagles that soared above the bay. Spreading her gray mottled wings, once silken and shimmery, Cela caught an updraft and rose through the mist. Cool air smelled of brine, and she tasted salt on her lips. Only in these precious predawn hours could she take flight, hidden among eagles. When the sun appeared, she hid herself among mortals.

In this crisp gray sky, she remembered her summery life near the Aegean's unending blue. When little of man's unnaturalness haunted the air, the land, the sea. The memory still hung in the air's endless river, in its caressing currents

around her wings. Winds like the brush of her lover's lips against her ear, his kiss against her throat.

Turning in a gentle circle, she drifted above a sailboat that glided like a white ghost through teal waters, steeling her eyes against the memory of her lover's face, the horror in his eyes after Hera had ruined her. She winced, letting out an eagle's shriek at the echo of those horrid words on his lips. Harpy. Monster. And she couldn't even respond—the curse had stolen her voice, reducing it to a bitter rasp.

Cela flew toward the tall firs lining Washington State's rocky coast as the sun threaded gold and pink light through the treetops. The distant smell of storm clouds was sharp as she landed in a pine grove near the point, where the strait met the ocean.

Folding her wings tightly, she wrapped them against her body with the folds of cloth she'd shed earlier. With wings concealed, she dressed in baggy clothing and headed toward a yellow beach house on the point where she cared for a mortal's house.

Anything to keep her precious few hours of flight.

It took four knocks for Ryan Sanders to open the door. Thin and drawn, Ryan greeted her warmly. Seeing his pale eyes sunken into shadowed sockets and the bristle of brown hair on his scalp, she knew his sickness had gotten worse. Cancer he'd called it. Man's curse. Blue sweats hung on his body like a sheet blown across a tree. Death smelled close.

Her heart ached for him. Nearly a decade she'd cared for this house. She'd grown to love this kind mortal, his smooth hands and gentle voice. He treated her as a sweet older lady, knowing nothing of the maiden trapped inside. The only man to treat her as equal, not monster.

Cela hobbled toward a small closet in clunky boots that hid her taloned feet and pulled out the vacuum and mop as Ryan called them. The wood floor creaked as she rolled out the vacuum, but something on the wall chimed. Ryan picked it up and spoke to it. Mortals' customs grew stranger these days and she understood them less and less. So many metal boxes they carried, always beeping, flashing and trilling.

"Hello? Hi, Rick, where are you? North of L.A.? Man, you said you'd be here tonight!" The disappointment on Ryan's face was clear as he carried the box to the white sofa, collapsing onto it.

Cela's heart squeezed at his pain, and she focused on the vacuum, trying to remember its steps. Plug it into the wall and press its switch. Ryan thought her simple about man's devices, but she learned what she needed.

"I know—that same storm's supposed to hit here tonight," he said with a sigh. "Just wanted family here when Dr. Hassan called with the results, that's all. Yeah, glad you're not hurt." Ryan smiled. "I may need more of your bone marrow. You're my closest genetic match, so don't get washed off a cliff or something. Yeah, seeya soon, Rick."

Ryan struggled to his feet, his footfalls soft against the pale wood floor. The room smelled of cool air and astringents, a hint of unnatural peaches from the colored bits in a bowl on the coffee table. No peaches she'd ever seen grew in those strange shades of green and blue. Another of man's al chemical magics.

She felt his sharp unease as he leaned against the screen door and sighed. Cela wanted to lay her hand against his brow and soothe him, but she couldn't. He'd see the monster, not the maiden. She stared at her wrinkled hands, hands that once tortured mortals in Zeus' name, wings that pounded in fury after them, driving them to madness. Her chest ached at the memory of snatching food from starving mouths. All done for a selfish god who cared only for himself. Ryan wiped moisture off his face, and she envied him that.

Harpies felt tears but could not shed them.

Unable to watch his pain any longer, Cela left the vacuum and moved to Ryan's side.

"Can I help?" she asked.

Always that polite smile on his lips.

He shook his head then stared into her face, his ocean blue eyes meeting hers. She smiled. Aegean blue.

"Thanks, but no."

Nodding, she patted his sleeve and plodded toward the vacuum, her gait clumsy in the clunky boots. There were floors to sweep.

* * *

Cela spent the day cleaning Ryan's house while he sat immobile in a soft blue chair facing the screen door. Above the dry scent of dust and man's chemicals, she smelled the ocean churn. It vibrated along her spine, quivered in her bound wings. Another battle of sea nymphs and wind spirits left unchecked by Poseidon, her long-absent father. She felt no more love for him than she did for Zeus. Disgusted with the mortal invasion, Poseidon lived undisturbed in the deepest oceans, leaving the seas to chaos.

Tonight, wind and sea would wreak havoc.

When she finished her chores, Cela moved toward Ryan's shaky form. He stared at the horizon at something she could never see. Death. Cela had carried

many a soul to the underworld on such a journey. Never allowed to carry them to the Elysian Fields. At times, she heard Elysia call to Ryan, its breath sweet and calm. Once, it even singsonged above the vacuum's roar. But it had not called his name yet.

"I've finished cleaning," she said in a hoarse rasp after putting away the vacuum.

"Thanks, Cela. Let me get your pay," he said, starting to rise.

She pressed her hands against his arms, pushing him gently against the chair.

"Next time," she said with a smile. "When you are better."

His gaze pierced her. "There may not be a next time, Cela." He looked at his hands. "I'm dying."

She shook her head. "Death has not called your name yet," she replied, daring to lay a cool hand to his hot brow.

The wound up tension inside him ebbed and he almost sagged beneath her hand. He gripped the arms of his chair and sat down.

"The bone marrow transplant's my last hope. I'm waiting on a call and . . ." His voice trailed off.

Cela smelled the sour scent of fear as his bottom lip trembled. How ironic that mortals feared their journeys to such wondrous places.

His watery eyes brightened. “Cela, would you mind staying here tonight? I don’t want to be alone when the doctor calls.”

She nodded. If he asked, she’d stay with him forever.

By sunset, the sky had darkened with angry clouds, the first patters of rain and swell hitting the shore line. Cela walked onto the slate patio, watching the angry surf rise, feeling the air’s static charge deep in her breastbone. Wind buffeted the point, scuttling patio chairs and overturning potted plants. Writhing waves crashed along the rocks as the rains fell.

Inside, Ryan huddled in the blue chair near the wall box, his head tilted back as he slept. She hoped his news would be good when it came, but with the storm so close, she feared for him. Lightning arced across the dark horizon, smelling of ozone, thunder a distant bass echo above the roar of surf. Other creatures lurked beyond those rains, ready to speed up their mortality or prey on mortal fears. Cela laid a hand against her side, tracing the bound feathers. Hera delighted in those moments.

Inside, a shrill note screeched from one of Ryan’s boxes. Cela stepped inside and closed the glass door as the box continued to screech. A voice filled the room like an oracle, prophesying a storm, warning mortals about high seas and winds. Those on the coast, go to higher ground it chirped, then fell silent. And still Ryan slept.

Near the box on the wall, a steady red light blinked, the number one flashing at her. She did not understand all of these flashy, beeping things. And she did not need man’s oracle box to tell her a dangerous storm approached. Had Ryan missed something important? Had he slept through his important call?

Lightning tore a jagged gash across the sky, then dissolved as thunder crackled, rattling windows. She rushed to the glass door when the ocean’s white

froth spattered the patio. Like a demon, wind moaned over the roof and around the house. Lights flickered then went dark as surf gurgled onto the patio in fierce waves. It would soon reach the glass door.

Again, the oracle box shrieked, warning of storm surge and coastal flooding, and still Ryan slept. Cela felt paralyzed. All her instincts screamed for her to take flight, but she resisted them, knowing Ryan was too ill to leave his home. And she dared not reveal her wings to a mortal.

At last, Ryan stirred. He sat up, shaking, and glanced around the dark house.

“Power’s out,” he said with a sigh. “Cela, are you here?”

“I’m here, Ryan,” she answered, moving beside his chair. “Your box keeps telling us to find higher ground.”

“What? The weather radio went off?”

Holding onto the chair, Ryan struggled to his feet. “Shit, the floor’s wet!”

Cela looked down at the floor. Ocean water slithered under the door, pooling on the hardwood.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Ryan shouted above the wind. He took two steps, then grabbed the chair to steady himself.

The glass door groaned as the surf pounded it again, water pouring into the house. Cela grabbed Ryan’s arm and pulled him toward the front door. Moments later, the glass door shattered.

Flinging open the front door, Cela hobbled in her boots, Ryan barely keeping up. She knew she had only one chance to save him. Now, he would see the monster. And she would lose him forever.

Cela kicked off her boots, struggling out of the baggy shirt as she held Ryan on his feet despite the flailing winds. She huddled underneath the boughs of a Douglas fir, leaning Ryan against the trunk as she fumbled with the binding. At last freed, her wings unfurled and she stretched them in the storm winds.

“My God!” Ryan shouted, his eyes wide, mouth open.

She swept Ryan into her arms and took to the air. Feeling his warm mortal flesh against hers was a comfort she had not known in centuries, and she wanted to curl into that warmth forever. But he saw what she was now. She couldn’t look into his eyes as she soared above the treetops. She couldn’t bear that same hurtful expression she’d seen on her lover’s face. Besides, carrying a mortal to safety eased her conscience. The gods knew how many she’d dragged screaming to the underworld. At last, she would do some good in this place.

Fighting the fierce winds, Cela struggled to stay aloft as the storm pounded the coast, waves rushing headlong at Ryan’s beach house. At times, the little yellow cottage disappeared in the storm’s blackness, but above it all, Ryan hovered safe in her arms, his heart pounding against her chest, his arms around her waist. A touch so alive she wanted to drown in it.

Below, a thick gray fog crept along the pounding waves, coiled around rocks, moving toward the beach house. Cela hissed at the recognition. The Graes. Here to feed off mortal misery. She shuddered. Or carry Ryan off to the underworld.

She shrieked a call of warning at Hera’s minions. Three of them in the form of fog, their names: dread, alarm, and horror. As if this storm weren’t enough, the Graes were eager to cause more pain and suffering. Responding to Ryan’s distress, she realized. Or the smell of death.

Like a serpent, Dread rose from the fog that clung to the shore and rose in the air. Like a winged serpent, it hovered near the rocks a moment then coiled through the rain toward Cela.

“I thought I smelled something foul,” Dread hissed, slithering over Cela’s wings. “Celeano, why do you stink up the air? Torturing another mortal for Zeus?”

Cela beat her wings until the winged serpent retreated. “I’m protecting him from the likes of you.”

Above her, Horror soared like a ghostly eagle.

“Cela, put me down,” Ryan shouted. “This is crazy!”

“Yesss,” Horror hissed against Cela’s ear. “Put him down. Right here, right now.”

Falling to his death.

Alarm scuttled over the waves like a beetle then scampered onto the rocks below where Cela and Ryan hovered. “Have you taken his soul yet, snatched the last crumb of bread from his dying lips? Harpy.”

Cela rushed at the Graes, her wings scattering them into vapor, but they coalesced around her again in mid-air, taking on almost human forms. Horror reached tendrils toward Ryan, but Cela thrust her talons out.

“You will not touch him!”

“Drop him and save yourself,” Dread singsonged. “Run back to Zeus!”

Returning to a smoky essence, the Graes wove in and out of Cela’s wings, and she struggled against their magic to fly away from them, toward higher ground. Circling left, she dived toward shore, the Graes in pursuit. She landed in a hillside forest above the Pacific and propped Ryan against a tree.

“I know this is crazy,” she shouted as Ryan opened his mouth to speak, “but stay behind me and they cannot touch you!”

He stared at her wide-eyed and unmoving, shivering in the cold rain.

“You must trust me,” she said as the fog trickled around Cela’s ankles.

She pivoted on her taloned feet as the Graes reached the rain-soaked clearing, at last appearing to her in their goddess forms. Dread moved closer with cobra-like grace, its gold eyes unblinking, piercing. Horror swooped above her, its copper eyes hard as Alarm shuffled like a mantis toward Cela’s back. The need to take flight nearly stole Cela’s breath, but she did not move.

The sudden blow from Horror made Cela stumble as Dread struck out at her with deadly force. Cela beat her wings, knocking Alarm and Dread backward, but Horror hit her in the chest, knocking her to her knees, breath gone from her lungs.

“Give him up, Harpy! He’s just a mortal. Deliver him to Hades or we will. It’s his time.”

“No!” Cela screamed.

She rushed at all three Graes, but their blows were too many. She collapsed

against the rain-soaked ground as Horror stepped over her, gray fog trailing from its heels, and moved toward Ryan.

She flung herself between Horror and Ryan, covering him with her battered wings.

“Take me instead!”

Cela’s body sagged. This curse was forever. She knew that now. Like her sisters, she could never break it. If this gave Ryan more time in the place he loved, then she would go quietly to the underworld.

But she wouldn’t give him up to Hera’s minions.

“All three sisters with Hades,” Horror said with a purr. “Hera will be so pleased!”

Cela folded her wings, the wind slicing into her, and struggled to her feet.

“Wait!” Ryan’s thin voice carried above the wind. He motioned Cela toward him.

She knelt, her head bowed.

“What are you?” he asked. “All these years you’ve cleaned my house . . .”

She winced, unable to look at his face. What was she? Harpy. Monster. Soul Taker. The Graes were right. That stink never left anything.

Gently, Ryan touched her left wing. “An angel?”

“What?” Cela gasped as she lifted her face to his. Her chest burned. “You think I’m an angel?”

He nodded. “I’m so near the border of this world. I thought it was time—”

She smiled, touching her hand to his face. “No, not at my hand.” She glared at the hard-faced Graes. “Or theirs. It’s my time to cross that border, not yours. You still have some time left.”

Ryan cupped her face in his hands. “Cela, all these years I’ve wanted to touch your beautiful face. Every time I hear your lyrical voice, my heart aches. With my cancer, I just couldn’t.”

“Beautiful?” Cela shook her head. “I’m a hag like them!” She pulled away from him, pressing her hands to her face. “A harpy! Can you not see that?”

Ryan shook his head.

Dread turned to fog as the rain stilled, coiling around Cela’s head.

“Foolish goddess! See what you are, not what you believe, what you’re told.”

The fog shimmered until Cela saw her reflection. Wheaten hair and ivory wings, the maiden she had not seen in centuries.

Cela frowned, shaking her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Curses only work on those who believe in them,” said Horror. “Those who believe in the monster also see it.” Horror cackled. “We did our job well! Your

sisters chose the underworld. You're free to choose, too, Celeano."

Cela knew her choice.

The three Graes faded into dying winds, the fog and rain at last subsiding.

Ryan smiled at her. "Take me home, Cela."

Lifting him in her arms, Cela took to the air, reveling in the updrafts and eddying air currents until she landed on Ryan's patio. She carried him through the broken glass and across the water-logged floor into the kitchen. All through the house, lights blinked, that number one flashing at her again. This time, Ryan saw it. He swallowed hard.

"That's probably Doctor Hassan's message," said Ryan, his voice heavy as he moved toward the box on the wall. He lifted his hand toward a winking light, letting it hover a moment, but then he drew his hand back.

"Ryan," she said, a hand against his shoulder. "I don't know how much time you have left. When it's time, I'll carry your soul to the Elysian Fields." She glanced around the room at the disheveled furniture. "But tomorrow, you should fire your house-keeper. This place is a mess."

He laughed, laying his hand over hers. "Just don't bind those beautiful wings, Cela."

"Never again," she said.

Ryan reached toward the flashing box again.

“Or yours,” she whispered against his ear.

He nodded as she moved toward the patio. The best flying was after a storm. As she took to the air, ivory wings soaring, she heard Dr. Hassan’s voice echo from Ryan’s wall box.

HEART OF STONE

Scott William Carter

Scott William Carter's short stories have appeared or will shortly appear across a wide range of publications and genres, including *Analog, Weird Tales, Crimewave,* and *Cicada,* among others. He lives in Oregon's lush Willamette Valley with his wife, daughter, and an assortment of critters. Find out more about his work at his website: *www.scottwilliamcarter.com*.

She had been with Thomas a year when he told her he might be able to see again.

"It's a new procedure," he said, touching her hand across the glass table. "They can repair my retinas with lasers."

His rough, deeply tanned hands engulfed her tiny pale ones. They were alone in her sanctuary, as they always were when they were together, sitting at the table in the rotunda that overlooked the ocean. The windows, ceiling, and floor of the alcove were all tinted glass; on the other side, they were mirrors to keep out prying eyes. The half-eaten roast chicken sat between them, steam still rising from the meat. Mozart played faintly from the speakers in the other room.

Madeline heard the excitement in his voice, saw the hope on his rugged face, and felt her body go cold. She had never seen him look this way—small and afraid, like a little boy. This was not the man she had chosen, a fearless adventurer who had never let blindness stop him from enjoying life. He had raced sled dogs in the Alaskan Iditarod. He had climbed Mount Everest with a single guide, one who had not been trained to work with the blind. He had founded a multimillion dollar company by creating a revolutionary breakthrough in voice controlled computer interfaces.

“What is it?” he asked.

She pulled her fingers away.

“You know what I am,” she said, looking out through the windows. A seagull swooped over the rippling ocean waves, and far out on the horizon, a catamaran’s yellow sail fluttered. “You know that if you do this, you’ll never be able to see me again.”

And while she spoke, the serpents on her head hissed and snapped at the empty air, as they always did when she was angry.

It was five thousand years before she decided to see if it was possible for someone to love her.

It was to be an experiment on her part, nothing more. Madeline knew she was the ugliest thing any living creature could ever look upon. It was not always so, but it had been that way for so long she could no longer remember what it felt like *not* to be ugly. At one time, she knew this bothered her, but she could not remember this either. She had accepted her ugliness, and her acceptance had given her strength. Rather than rage endlessly against the gap-toothed shaman who had doomed her because of her vanity, she had quickly focused her energy into accomplishing all that she could despite her limitations.

In the age of the Egyptian Pharaohs, she had made her living as a veiled fortune teller, never revealing an inch of her body. In the days of the Greeks, she had put bread on the table by working as a prostitute, never walking into her bedchamber until a man was blindfolded. In the Middle Ages, she had been a thief, wrapping her face in silk scarves, and only robbing houses and manors she knew to be empty. She tried not to turn anyone to stone, not because she cared

one way or the other what happened to them, but only because it always brought a lot of unwanted attention.

Sometimes unwanted attention had spawned legends. Myths. Stories passed down through time. They could malign her all they wanted, it did not matter because it did not affect her own happiness. They had given her the name Medusa, among others, but she had always chosen her own based on the time.

And now she lived as Madeline Hogart, making her living as stock investor, of all things, in a custom-designed mansion on a cliff that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. She liked this life the best, because it had made her richer than even a Pharaoh could have dreamed. Though she had no contact with people, living in the mirrorless interior of her mansion, her army of servants giving her what she needed by carefully orchestrated transactions, she was content. A phone and Internet connection were all she needed to conduct her business.

She played the piano. She painted watercolors. She read all the world's great literature, always in the original language. And it was only after many decades that she began to wonder if someone could love her.

It was a challenge, and she had grown hungry for one.

The dinner was growing cold. Madeline looked at the ocean, thinking of all the hours she had wasted online searching for just the right man to lure into her bed. Even through the tinted glass, the glare on the dark blue water was so strong she had to squint.

It had taken two years to find Thomas. In the end it had not been in a support group for blind people, where she had first looked, but in a forum for windsurfers. It had taken another year of emails and phone calls until she was ready for him to see her in person. There had still been a risk, of course, but she had played him well. When his hands found the snakes, he had recoiled at first,

but it had not taken him long to overcome that initial reaction. She had to turn a few grasshoppers to stone for him to believe the rest of her story, but then he loved her even more. She had counted on that being the case. She knew that what he prized above all in a woman was her individuality, and no one could say she was not unique.

She looked at Thomas. He put down his silver-ware, and sat there with his hands clasped.

“Don’t you love me?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said, “you know that. Don’t you want me to see?”

She hesitated. What was the right response? Everything she said to him was carefully calculated, designed to get him to love her. Honesty was never one of her talents, nor had she ever seen it as a necessity. “I want you to stay with me,” she said.

“That’s not up for debate,” he said.

She pushed away from the table and stood, turning to face the window. Here was the ultimate test of his love. If it came down to a choice between her and his sight, what would he do?

“You know that’s not true,” she said. “You know what you’ll become if you see me.”

She allowed her voice to break at the end. It had the desired effect. She heard his chair scoot along the floor, heard him step up behind her, felt his heavy hands on her slim shoulders. He kissed her neck, and the snakes quieted.

“I love you more than anything,” he said, “but you’ve got to understand, I’ve wanted this my entire life.”

“But haven’t you been happy as a blind person?”

His fingers bit into her shoulders. She felt his breath on her neck as he leaned forward.

“Of course!” he said. “I would not accept anything less. But this . . . this is sight! I want to be able to see the color of the sky. I want to see the mountains I have scaled. I want to look at the face of the woman I love and see her with eyes rather than my hands.”

She let a tear fall and then feigned a shuddering breath. “It will kill you.”

“That won’t happen to me,” he said. “I love you too much. My love will overcome the curse.”

“That’s foolish sentimentalism.”

He turned her around and faced him. His blue eyes, glassy and faded, looked beyond her, but they were filled with determination.

“No, it’s not. I believe that is the way around your curse. If I love you enough, I won’t turn to stone.”

In the end, she could not dissuade him. She would not beg. That would render her experiment worthless. It was seven weeks before he had received enough training to be able to return home. She allowed a servant to let him into her sanctuary, while she waited on the white leather couch. The room was dark except for the flickering light of the fire, her overhead lights programmed to fade

as the sun went down. She could not risk seeing her reflection in the windows.

When she heard the clicking of his cane on her marble floor just around the corner, she raised the hood of her black cloak.

“Madeline?” he said.

“Did it work?” she asked.

“Yes. It’s amazing.”

“But you’re still using a cane.”

“For a time, yes,” he said. “My mind is still making sense of what it sees. Turn around. Face me.”

She knew this moment was coming, and she had debated for a long time what to do. It was his choice, after all, and deep down inside she did hope he was right. Perhaps love would be enough to end the curse. She just needed to give him one more opportunity to walk away. One more opportunity to prove his love for her was genuine and deep.

“No,” she said. “You need to leave now. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I will not leave.”

That was it. She had done all she could. Keeping her head bowed, she rose from the couch and turned to face him. Then, all at once, she lifted her head and threw off the hood. She felt the snakes stretch out briefly, then recoil at the sight of Thomas.

He inhaled sharply. His eyes, eyes that were no longer glazed and white, widened. His face contorted, his mouth shaping into a scream. But the sound never came. His body froze, all the color slipping away, a silent grayness starting at his eyes and spreading outward, down his neck and over his body, until all the flesh and clothing had been replaced by stone.

It took a great deal of her resources to arrange his disappearance, but she was confident that she had left no clues. The story was that he had gone windsurfing with some friends, fallen off and drowned. She paid a good deal of money to make sure there were witnesses who said this was so.

Knowing now that love was not enough, that it would never end her curse, she resigned herself to living the rest of eternity alone. She did not doubt Thomas loved her, so there was no point in duplicating the experiment.

But something unexpected happened.

Her breasts became tender and swollen, and her areolas darkened. She felt nauseated all the time. She was frequently tired. It wasn't until her belly began to bulge that she realized what was happening. Her first instinct was to get rid of it, but then she realized that here was another experience. Even if she brought it to term, it was likely the child would turn to stone once leaving her womb, but Madeline would still have the experience of childbirth. She would have to do it alone. It was a challenge that excited her.

She mastered it as she had mastered everything before, and then the day came when a child's cry broke the stillness of her sanctuary. Madeline lay naked on the floor in her bedroom, three layers of white satin sheets protecting her Persian rug. The pain was nothing—when you had lived five millennia, you had lived through far worse—and when it was over, she felt euphoric. For once, the snakes on her head were still.

She had not expected the child to even cry. She sat up, scooping the thing out of the mess of blood and other fluids that had soaked her sheets. It was a girl, and she had her father's looks—a few locks of curly chestnut hair, bright blue eyes, an olive complexion. Even now, wailing, she was beautiful.

Madeline waited for the change to come, but it never did. Flesh remained flesh. The baby went on crying.

"My, you do have lungs, don't you?" she said to it.

Then it occurred to her—of course, her father had been born blind. Maybe it was genetic. This girl might be blind, too.

If the babe was blind, Madeline could raise it for a time, see what it was like to have a child. It was something else to experience. And when she grew tired of the endeavor, she would give it up for adoption.

Madeline never expected to keep the baby. She turned out to be quite colicky, crying constantly, sleeping only in fits. After a month, Madeline was exhausted. Plus she was having a hard time keeping up with the markets, and she could not allow for any slippage. It had taken years of prudent buying and selling, and more years for the miracle of compound interest to work in her favor, for her to get to this point. She wasn't going to piss it all away because of another foolish experiment.

But a strange thing happened. Any time she thought about arranging for an underground adoption, she became short of breath. If she tried to imagine what life would be like without the babe, it wasn't long before she was in the bathroom throwing up. Even when she debated about arranging for a nanny to help her out a day or two a week, she felt queasy.

These reactions mystified her, and she kept putting off the day when Kali (she eventually had to give her a name, just for convenience) would leave for another month or two just to keep it out of her mind. Another month or two turned into another year or two, and soon giving Kali up didn't occur to her at all.

Kali was a beautiful, normal human child in all respects, and, thankfully, it wasn't long before she had grown out of her colicky stage. Raising a blind child was hard enough as it was. Madeline relished all of the experiences of motherhood—breastfeeding, bathing, singing the child to sleep. Soon Kali was eating solid foods and smiling with delight. Next she was crawling, then walking, then attempting to mimic her mother's words.

The year's passed quickly, much faster than any years Madeline had lived. She taught Madeline to read brail, to think deeply, to be strong as every modern woman needed to be—especially one who was blind. She home schooled her for as long as she could, but she knew for Kali to live a full and happy live (and that was what Madeline wished for her, above all else), she would need to experience the world in ways Madeline couldn't. She had already made certain that Kali didn't have her mother's curse, performing a few experiments with some goldfish, and so when the time came to put Kali in first grade, Madeline reluctantly did so. But from the moment Kali left in the morning to the moment she returned in the afternoon, Madeline worried. There was so much that could go wrong in the world, so much that could hurt her. She was, after all, only an ordinary human being. Yet somehow Kali avoided all of life's pitfalls, except a few scrapes and bruises, and grew tall and beautiful.

There was only one last great pitfall left, and Madeline had been dreading its coming. Kali was fourteen when the moment finally arrived.

"There's this operation, mother," Kali said.

Of all the ironies—they were sitting in that same alcove where she and

Thomas had sat when he had made is own announcement. Instead of dinner, though, Kali had been working her way through *The Great Gatsby* in brail. Madeline had been reading the Wall Street Journal. The sun had vanished under the sea, but the sky was still awash with crimson and golden light.

"What do you mean?" There was a quiver in Madeline's voice, and this time she was not faking it.

"You know what I mean," Kali said. "My father had the operation. You never told me about it."

Madeline swallowed. Kali had never learned the need to mask her emotions, and her face had darkened with a scowl.

"How did you find out?"

"I'm not dumb, mother. I did some checking. I also have friends at school who know how to get to records and stuff."

"I see."

"Why didn't you tell me? What didn't you tell me there was a chance I could see? Don't you want me to see? Don't you want me to have a good life? Why, mother?"

Madeline put down the paper. There were so many ways to reply. What could she say that would not jeopardize her daughter's love? She could not bear the thought of her daughter not loving her.

She rose from the table. "Come with me."

“Where?” Kali said.

“Just come. I have to show you something.”

Sighing, Kali stood and allowed her mother to guide her into the recesses of the mansion. They went down one flight of stairs, then another, until they came to a locked door. The air was cool and damp.

“You’ve never taken me here before,” Kali said.

“I’ve never had a need,” Madeline said.

Madeline unlocked the door and led her daughter into the basement, brushing the cobwebs out of their path. The air was stale and smelled of mold. The floor was soft dirt, the walls concrete. She flicked on the single hanging light bulb. There, in the center of the room, the only thing in the room, was a statue of a screaming man.

Thomas.

Madeline guided her daughter’s hands, placing one hand on each cheek. At first touch, Kali yelped and jumped back.

“What is that? It felt like . . . like . . .”

“He is your father,” Madeline said.

She felt no need for subtlety. It was the blunt shock of reality that Madeline hoped would do the trick. Kali had known about her mother’s curse since she was old enough to keep a secret. The truth, as it turned out, was the easiest way

to explain her mother's peculiar nature.

Kali swallowed hard. "My fa . . . But you said, you told me—"

"I told you he drowned at sea because I didn't want to upset you. But this is the truth. He had the same operation you want to have. I told him if he did he would have to leave, that he would never be able to see me again, but he didn't listen. This is what happened to him."

Kali was silent for a long time. Looking at her in the dim light, Madeline was struck by how much Kali looked like her father. She certainly acted like him—fearless to the point of foolishness, strong willed to the point of stubbornness. So it came as no surprise when Madeline heard echoes of Thomas in what Kali said next.

"That won't happen to me," she said. "I don't believe it. I love you too much for that. I love you even though you lied to me. My love is stronger than your curse. It can't turn me to stone. It *can't.*"

"You're wrong," Madeline said. "It's all happened before."

"Not to me," Kali said, shaking her head fiercely. "Not to me."

"You'll have to leave. You'll never . . . never . . ."

"No, mother."

". . . be able to return."

Madeline was now on the ground, hugging her knees. What was happening to her? The world felt like it was collapsing, a tunnel of darkness swallowing her

whole. Her snakes were wrapped so tightly around her head that it felt as if they were about to crush it. Was this the rapture she often wondered if she would live to see?

Then she felt Kali's arms wrapping around her, tightening, pulling her into the warmth of her embrace.

"No, mother," Kali whispered. "I will never leave you. *Never*."

This time Madeline *did* beg. She pleaded. She cried. She wailed for her daughter to not go through with it. Kali had her own money, an account she had created herself for her unspent allowance, and there was nothing Madeline could do to stop her.

Kali was too much like her father. Once she had set her mind on something, nothing would detour her. And that was the problem. Madeline worried about what would happen when her daughter was well enough to leave the hospital. She would want to come to her mother, of course. Madeline couldn't let that happen. She wanted Kali to live a long and full life, as long and full as any mortal's could ever be, and even the possibility that she might someday look upon her mother's face was too much for Madeline to bear.

She would have to run. She would have to find a place where her daughter could never find her.

Eventually, however, Madeline realized that there was still risk in running. She had raised her daughter too well. She was smart and resourceful. No matter where Madeline hid, there was a good chance Kali would find her.

So it was not enough to hide. Madeline would have to cease to be.

The thought of her own death had always greatly terrified her. There were times when the sheer hopelessness of her existence made her contemplate suicide, but she had always been too much of a coward to go through with it. But now she had no other choice. Still, it took her weeks to summon her courage, and it was not until she received a phone call from Kali, announcing her arrival that afternoon, that Madeline found the will to act.

She dressed in the same black cloak she had worn the day Thomas had come home from the hospital. She kept the hood up and her head bent low as she made her way across the sand toward her little rowboat. The noon sun blazed high overhead, and the breeze was still. She climbed into the boat and began to row. The current was strong and she had to work hard. It wasn't long before she was sweating profusely, but she refused to rest. Kali could be home at any moment.

Twenty minutes later, she finally stopped and allowed herself to look up. The shore was a jagged line of green and brown, the sky above it the most intense color of blue she had ever seen. She wondered if Kali was looking at the sky right now. She wondered what she thought of it.

While she was looking, a seagull swooped in front of her, glanced in her direction, then turned to stone and plummeted into the ocean's depths.

The cold splash of the water on her face was a stark reminder of what she had to do.

It was simple, really. She was going to look over the bow into the reflection in the water. When she saw her own face, and turned to stone, her own added weight would carry her forward. She would sink fast and deep. This was what she wanted. There was a chance that her body, even as stone, would still go on turning other creatures to stone who looked upon it, so she had to end up where no one would find her.

But the longer she sat there, the harder it became to go through with it. She

would not live to see Kali grow up. To see her go to college. Get married. Travel the world. Have a child. Or none of that and something else entirely. Something only Kali herself could dream.

The rowboat bobbed up and down, and the sun felt hot on top of her head. She didn't think she had been there long, but suddenly she heard a voice calling out to her.

"Mother!"

It was Kali. The boat had drifted slowly around, and Madeline had her back to the shore. She forced herself not to turn. She knew Kali was a strong rower and would be here in seconds.

"Mother! Don't!"

Closer now. But Madeline had finally found her courage.

She leaned over the side and looked down into the water.

She saw the bone-white skin, the oily heads of the snakes peeking out of her hood, the gaping shadows of her eyes . . . but something was wrong. The water was rippling. The image wasn't clear, and she didn't change into stone.

But her quick movement still tilted her off-balance.

She plunged into the cold saltwater, taking it into her mouth and into her nose. She had never learned to swim, never had a reason to, and she flailed about, gasping for air, constantly sinking under the surface. Her cloak, weighted by water, hung on her like a suit of chain mail. Then it occurred to her that this might also save her daughter. Perhaps she would die, or perhaps not, but maybe

she would sink deep into the ocean and live out eternity.

She stopped struggling and started to sink.

Before she had gone far, a pair of hands closed about her waist and pulled her upward. She struggled, but soon they both broke the surface of the water, each of them gasping for air. After some amount of effort, Kali had pulled her mother into the rowboat.

Madeline's hood had fallen away, exposing her.

"No!" she cried, covering her face. "No! Turn away! Turn away quickly."

"Mother, look at me."

"No!"

Madeline felt her daughter's hands grip tightly to her wrists and yank her hands away from her face. Fearing the worst, she looked at her daughter. Kali was squinting so hard her eyes were tiny slits, but Madeline could still see a hint of blue in there. She kept waiting for the change to come, for the horrible crunch of flesh turning into stone, but it didn't. The sun was bright at her daughter's back.

"I'm still here," Madeline said. "I told you it wouldn't happen to me. I *told* you."

Madeline heard a sizzle, and then the snakes attached to her head popped free and slithered over the side and splashed into the water. She felt the warm rush of blood flowing into her skin. She felt the aches and pains of a mortal body returning to itself.

But all the while, she went on looking at her daughter's face. For the first time in five thousand years, Madeline saw her own reflection, and it was in Kali's face. She saw herself for who she was in that moment—not the physical reality, but who she had *become*. She was beautiful. And extraordinary. And unique. She knew then that both Madeline and Thomas had been right, and they had also been wrong.

Love had been powerful enough to overcome the curse, this was true. But it had not been because they loved *her*.

It had been because she had finally learned how to love someone else.

BLACK ANNIE

Jean Rabe

When not writing, Jean Rabe feeds her goldfish, visits museums, and attends gaming conventions. A former newspaper reporter, she is the author of nine fantasy novels for TSR, Inc., including the *Dragonlance* Fifth Age Trilogy. Her latest novel is *Dhamon: The Downfall*. She has written numerous fantasy and science fiction short stories which appear in the anthologies *Merlin* and *Tales from the Eternal Archives: Legends, Guardsmen of Tomorrow* , and *Warrior Fantastic*.

The cat's throat was slit, the deed done within the hour, as the blood was still wet and glimmering in the late afternoon sun. It had been a pretty cat, with an elegant body, long cream-colored hair, and dramatic black markings on its face and paws. Its tail was feathery, and Annie imagined it to be soft all over, eminently petable. It had probably been affectionate, as even in death it had a kind look about it. And it was plump, indicating it had been well fed and likely had belonged to someone in the nearby town.

A cord was tied around the cat's back legs, knotted tightly so it wouldn't slip loose as the little corpse was dragged across the ground. Back and forth, back and forth in front of Annie's cave. She could smell the blood, and the aniseed they'd liberally applied to the cat's coat. She could hear the buzzing flies that were dipping down to hover around its neck, could imagine the pain and disbelief the creature had suffered in its dying.

Back and forth, back and forth.

"Y'sure she's in there, William? This hag?"

The opening to her cave was low to the ground, so from where she was crouched Annie couldn't see the speaker's face, just his legs in worn, ill-fitting trousers, the fabric making a shushing sound as he walked back and forth tugging the dead cat. By the voice she knew who he was, an old man who lumbered to the lake every morning with nets and fishing poles, passing not more than a hundred feet near her cave. Though by her nature she hated all the people in the little town, she hadn't wished ill of the old fisherman until now, truly hadn't wished ill of any of them.

"She's in there, all right. A hag, I'm certain of it. Fits the legend, and the place, Leicestershire, near the Dane Hills." This came from another man, and though Annie couldn't put a face to the words, she could tell by his tone that he was at least a few decades younger than the fisherman. "A hag is in there, a vile woman-devil that's been killing all of our sheep."

Not all of your sheep, Annie mentally corrected him, just one every several days when she got hungry. And usually the smallest ones in the flock, as the little ones were the most tender and tasty and were the easiest to slay. Never did she kill so many that it jeopardized the food stock of the villagers' she'd been careful on that point, so she was puzzled about why they were angry with her. She'd killed too many sheep when she first visited this English countryside seven hundred years past. The villagers came looking for her in force then, and she barely escaped. She went to Scotland, where in the Lowlands they called her Carlin, and in the Highlands the Hag of the Beare or Cailleach Bhuer for her deep blue skin. Then onto Ireland, where they called her Cally Berry in the north. In Wales they called her the Woman of the Stones, on the Isle of Man, Cailleach ny Groamch, and here in England Black Annis. But she heard one of the men outside refer to her as Black Annie. She preferred that name and settled on it.

"If she's in there, she's not going to crawl out, not with all of us here," said a man with a thin, nasally voice. "She probably heard that we've guns."

"D'ya really think there's a beastie in there, William? A monster that got my lamb last night?"

Fey tales revered her as an aspect of the goddess, the old woman who died at Samhaine to be reborn as a bride of Beltaine.

“Yeah, Connor, she’s in there. Can’t you smell the stench?”

The Book of Lecan claimed that she’d passed through seven cycles of life, death, and rebirth, and that in those cycles she’d taken seven mates.

“I smell something foul,” the old fisherman agreed.

Some myths honored her as being responsible for the weather and the seasons, others placed her as a mystical crone who coveted sitting by a family’s hearth, protecting them in exchange for their hospitality.

“You smell the hag,” William said. “Or maybe the remains of the lambs she’s killed.”

A few stories painted her as a beauty who represented womanhood fully realized and who would never age. But Black Annie was none of those things. She was merely a hag, a blue-skinned giant faerie with mottled green fangs and a cobweb tangle of dirty white curls. Her heart was hard and filled with bitterness for humankind. She didn’t know where the hatred came from; she just accepted that it was there.

“How d’you know for sure? That she’s in there?” This from the old fisherman. “Could be the den of badgers. I’ll not keep this up much longer. M’ knees are bad, you know.”

“The cave. Just look at the cave. She’s in there all right, I say again. That’s a Bower Close if ever there was one. See the scratches? An’ see the oak? Scratches there on the low limb. Tales say that hags perch in trees so they can leap down to eat lambs and children.”

Never children, Annie thought. She'd tasted human flesh centuries past and found it unpalatable.

She had dug the cave out of rock with her powerful fingers, chose this spot because of the tree. It shaded the opening during the hottest part of the day, and at night she could climb it to get a good view of the countryside and the stars. Too, it wasn't terribly far from her den of seven centuries past. It was like coming home.

"Well, if she's in there, she's not coming out," the fisherman stated glumly. "It's Easter Monday, William. And this isn't such a thing t' do on Easter Monday. Not a Christian thing t'do."

William made a tsk-tsking sound. "Christian it is indeed! Ripping the hag from our soil and keeping our children safe, our flocks of sheep whole. And as for Easter Monday . . . Well, that's just the time to do it." William raised his voice and the fisherman stopped in his tracks, cat corpse directly in front of Annie's cave. "Legend says that hundreds of years ago on Easter Monday the good Christian folks of Liecester slew a cat and dragged it near the hag's lair to draw her out. They killed her with clubs and knives. Something magical about a dead cat soaked in aniseed. Hags can't resist it, I've read. Too tempting a treat to eat."

It was the fisherman's turn to make the tsk-tsking sound. He resumed his back and forth course. "That was centuries ago, William Tanner. You're talking fairy tales."

"Yes, centuries. But it's the truth, the tales. And now we've guns we brought home from the Great War," William countered. "Better than clubs and knives." He thumped something against the ground, and Annie suspected it was the butt of his rifle.

“Guns. To kill this hag with, William.”

“Yes.”

“Just make sure all of you keep them guns pointed at the cave and not at me.”

“You’re really sure she’s in there?” This came from someone else.

The fisherman snorted. “I see nothing magical in this dead cat, William. And I’m not sure this hag you’ve got the village worked up about even exists. Wolves could be killing the sheep.”

“You saw the lamb from three nights past,” William argued. “No wolf did that.”

“Well, I’m not crawling into that cave to prove you wrong. I am, however, going home.” With that the fisherman dropped the rope and strode away. “I’ll be using different bait in the morning, and it is fish I’ll be catching.”

“Fool,” William spat.

“I’ll not be going in that cave either,” another man said. “Could be a big badger or something worse in there.”

“Could be a hag, like the mayor says,” someone offered. “But I’m not looking in there either.”

“Fools.”

So William, the man behind this affront, was the little town’s mayor, Annie realized. It had been a pastor, not a politician, who’d managed to work up the

villagers seven centuries past when she'd dug a cave between the settlements of Appleby Parva and Appleby Magma, near the counties of Warwicksh ire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire, England's beautiful East Midlands.

"You'll see I'm right. All of you will see. You'll see the hag is real."

Annie spotted William then, as he bent over to pick up the rope and peered into her cave. She knew he couldn't see her, the stone dark, her skin dark, and the shadows too thick for his weak human eyes to poke through. He sniffed and wrinkled his nose.

"Can't you smell that? Stinks like death, like the pit of Hell." Then William started dragging the cat himself. He wasn't a young man, but he wasn't far into his middle years. He had small eyes, and his face was long and angular; the only wrinkles were small and at the edges of his lips. "She'll come out, all right. The tales say hags can't resist dead cats."

But Annie didn't come out, at least not while the men were there. She couldn't let the sun touch her warty dark blue hide. William, it seemed, was reasonably well-versed on hag-lore, but he hadn't discovered one important tidbit. She couldn't let the sunlight touch her skin—that's the one thing she knew would kill her.

She crawled out of her cave well after the towns-men had given up and more than an hour after the sun had set. Craning her neck this way and that, she felt the air playing around her face. Concentrating, she let the wind tell her what it knew—that they men had tugged the cat corpse back into the town. She could still smell the blood and the aniseed, and the pong of the men's sweat, stronger to her than the fresh scent of nearby lake.

The old fisherman was right: there was nothing magical about a dead cat, and nothing magic in the aniseed. Those were merely folklore ingredients someone had concocted long ago as a means to lure a Black Annis from her home.

But there was something special about cats, at least to Annie. As much as she hated humankind, she held great respect for animals, particularly cats. Her hard heart beat fast in anger that they'd killed such a beautiful creature in an attempt to draw her out. And her mind seethed because the measure had worked—Mayor William and his fellows had lured her from her comfortable cave . . . just not when they had expected.

The pale orange glow of the western horizon was giving way to twilight blue by the time Annie had skirted the sheep pens and crept to the edge of the town. It wasn't so different from the English villages of seven centuries past. There were a few cars, still horses here and there, and there were more and brighter lights showing from the windows. But the types of buildings were the same. There were three pubs, and she could smell meat roasting over a fire in the closest one. Her stomach rumbled in response, and she shifted her attention to a church to keep her mind off her hunger. There was one light in the back, likely the pastor straightening up after Easter services. Down the street was a shop with dresses in the window, and next to it a post office.

Annie glided past a butcher shop, pausing for a moment and setting aside the notion of breaking in and eating her fill. Then she slipped around the side of a primary school, leaving the main road. The town was nestled between two hills, the area spreading away from it all pleasantly rolling countryside. Homes, most of them cottages, spread away like the spokes on a wheel. Only a few were large and made of bricks. One of the more impressive houses was where Annie headed, the odor of the dead cat and aniseed drawing her.

She found the cat in a garbage bin behind the house, unceremoniously left amid chicken bones and wilted lettuce leaves. She reached a hand in and petted it, noting that indeed its fur was soft and pleasing to the touch. Annie laid it on the ground next to the bin, picking small bones from its fur and untying the cord. She mourned for it briefly, and then she smiled.

Pity they'd killed the cat, her most favorite of creatures. But a part of her was not so terribly, terribly upset . . . the cat's death gave her an excuse to enjoy herself. Annie went to the back door and with her powerful fingers broke the

lock.

William was in the kitchen, eating dinner with his wife and two daughters. The women screamed and William jumped to his feet, spilling his dinner and sending the chair flying to the floor.

“H-H-Hag!” he stammered. “I knew there was a hag!” The children fled from the kitchen as William grabbed up a carving knife. “My gun! Sarah, run and get my gun.”

But his wife was frozen in horror, and Annie took advantage of the situation. The muscles in her legs bunched and she leaped, catlike, clearing the table and grabbing William’s neck with her strong fingers. She slashed a nail across his throat, as had been done to the cat, then turned on his wife before his corpse hit the floor.

Hungry, she finished the family’s dinner and allowed herself a rare treat, helping herself to a bottle of wine tucked away in a cupboard. She stayed in the house until it was thoroughly dark outside, then she helped herself to a pearl necklace—not for its value but because she hadn’t worn anything so pretty in more than a dozen years.

Then Annie cleaned herself up at the kitchen sink, marveling at indoor plumbing, and tarrying with the water longer than necessary. Not a speck of blood left on her that she could see. She hated humans, and, worse, she hated having their blood cling to her. When she was satisfied the mayor’s stench was thoroughly off her, she left his house and went to each of his neighbors. She was methodical and fast, a shadow slipping from building to building, catlike still, breaking in when a door was locked, mostly just walking in, as there were few latches. There were screams, but they were few and so short they didn’t draw the attention of anyone next door.

Back and forth, back and forth, Annie went between the houses.

A large man with calused hands put up a fight in a house near the church. But he was no match for the hag's mystical strength. His family died as quickly as the lambs Annie had been feasting on. In one home, she surprised a young couple in the throes of passion. In another she slew an elderly woman in her sleep. There was a large family upstairs at the butcher shop, and it took her several minutes to dispatch all of them.

All the people died in the same manner—their throats slit, as the cat's had been.

Several of the homes had animals inside, dogs and cats mostly, and these Annie left alone. She only hated the humans, and her hard black heart beat in time with each slash of her nails as she killed one after the next. The slaying was good, as she hadn't gone on such a murderous spree in more than sixty years—and that had been on the Isle of Man after she witnessed two young men tying sticks to a cat's tail. Long decades before that, she had slaughtered an entire clan of Scots because a man had drowned his house cat's kittens, not wanting to deal with the litter.

There'd been other killings along the stretch of years, some of them because—like the people today—someone had tried to lure her out of her cave with an aniseed-drenched dead cat. All of those people thinking something magic in the little cat corpse, and all of them wrong. Not magic, Annie knew, just a passion for small creatures, cats in particular, just her meting out justice in the name of the dead cats.

Death for death.

Back and forth, back and forth, she continued to prowl and kill. She stopped at the church, looking in a back window and seeing the pastor scrawling away at something on his desk. At his feet were two cats, one rather small, covered with wavy gray fur. Its ears were surprisingly large and low on the sides of its head.

The other must have weighed twenty pounds, Annie guessed, with a remarkably thick coat striped orange and eggshell white. It had a large round face, and she wanted to stroke its considerable belly. The window was open, and she hiked up her stolen dress and made a move to jump inside. But the pastor started talking to himself, and she paused to listen.

"We've a funeral tomorrow, Tanta, Fluff." Annie realized he was talking to the cats. "This verse I think, from Job. Henry liked scripture from the Book of Job. 'For I know that thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living. ' " The gray cat stirred and rubbed against the pastor's leg, as if approving the verse choice. "And a psalm, I think, dear Tanta. This one: 'Have mercy upon me, O Lord; consider my trouble which I suffer of them that hate me . . ."

Annie snarled, she hated the pastor, hated all humankind.

He continued: ' . . . thou that liftest me up from the gates of death.' "

Death? *Death for the death of the pretty cat,* Annie cursed. *Death to all of them.*

The pastor continued to talk, and Annie shut out his pious words and moved elsewhere.

Three homes were empty, their families gone on holiday perhaps. What a surprise they would return to, all their friends dead. These vacant places she explored to catch her breath, finding a few more necklaces to wear, a soft bed to sit on for a while, and discovering a pocket watch with the image of a train running across its golden face. She found the tick-tick of it soothing, and after holding it to a misshapen ear for several moments, she thrust it into the pocket of a dress she'd taken from a closet above the butcher's, the only dark one hanging there. Lace and silk with shiny buttons, the dress had managed to fit her dark mood and her broad shoulders.

Another house, and she acquired a bangle bracelet made of ivory, a sharp contrast to her dark blue skin. She took a silver ring off a woman's hand, having to tug the finger off to get it. Annie held her hand out in front of her face, admiring the bangle and the silver ring, both bloody. She wrinkled her nose at the stench of the men and women she'd slaughtered, and she washed herself in a large bathroom sink before continuing her massacre.

According to the pocket watch, it was past midnight by the time she'd killed everyone in the houses, and the caretaker of the mill, as well as a lone man she spotted strolling past the cemetery. The pubs were still open, and music was coming from the closest one. Someone was playing a bladder pipe. Annie had lived long enough to learn a lot about music, even though she typically hated it. The pipe had a distinctive loud sound, the instrument consisting of a reed hooked to a wooden tube, which was in turn affixed to an animal bladder. It was played much like the bagpipes she'd heard in Scotland. Another instrument joined it, this reminding Annie of a psaltery, an ancient harp made of a wooden board with gut strings wound between pegs.

She peered in the pub's window and saw the old fisherman playing the bladder pipe, and a woman next to him, perhaps his wife, playing the other instrument, plucking at the strings with age-spotted fingers. Annie moved to the door, straightened her dress, and went inside.

The instruments fell the floor, chairs were knocked back, patrons screamed and tried to rush past her. She slashed out at them as they came, aiming at their necks, killing them as the cat had been killed. One man pulled a pistol from his pocket, but Annie was on him before he could fire. Another one came running at her from the back of the room, a kitchen knife above his head. She kicked him in the stomach, knocking him to the floor. Then she stood on his belly, bent, and slashed his throat open.

"Hag!" Someone finally managed an intelligible word.

“The beast exists!”

“A monster!” This came from the old fisherman. “William spoke true!”

“Mayor’s right, there is a hag! Someone get the mayor!”

Softer: “She’s wearing Netty’s good dress. And Alora’s bracelet.”

“Get the mayor!” someone repeated.

For a heartbeat Annie considered telling them the mayor was the first man killed. She knew their tongue . . . knew Scottish, Irish, German, a dozen other languages. But she hated them, and she didn’t consider them worthy of conversing with. Instead she snarled, baring her mottled green fangs, and she proceeded to kill them all.

The cries from the pub roused the people who’d been drinking in the other two. Some came out to see what the ruckus was about, and these were quickly dispatched by Annie. Others ran home, and Annie decided she would have to check all the houses again make sure she got them all.

She finished with the second pub and was moving onto the third when she saw the pastor running down the street, fist raised in the air and face red from his unaccustomed exertion. She gave him a passing glance and then ducked into the pub. She’d finished the few remaining patrons in here by the time the pastor got to the door.

“Devil!” the pastor bellowed. He stared wide-eyed at her and at the corpses that were strewn on the floor. “ ‘And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird!’ ”

Finally, Annie spoke. “Aye, man. I hate.” She came at the pastor, lips curled up in a hideous grin.

He thrust a cross forward, as if she were a vampire that might be cast back by it. She cackled and batted it away, then batted him away, her great strength propelling him out onto the street. She kicked at him several times, hearing ribs crack, but making sure he was still alive. Then she dashed away to conduct one last search of all the houses.

Back and forth, back and forth.

It was nearly dawn when she returned to her cave, dragging two lambs with her. The night’s revelry had left her ravenous, and she ate both carcasses before the sun had cleared the horizon, following them down with a bottle of whiskey she’d taken from one of the pubs. The drink helped her forget the image of the pretty cat that had been murdered and dragged across the entrance to her home.

She wasn’t worried about the few dozen cats remaining in the town. Cats were clever creatures and could well survive on their own—and were probably better off without their human companions. Annie hadn’t left the pastor alive to care for them, nor because he seemed kind to the two cats that had been curled at his feet. Rather, she wanted one man left alive to bury the bodies and to recount the tale of her glorious massacre. Annie needed her legend to grow.

Perhaps this pastor might get it correct, she mused, as she settled back into the far recesses of her Bower Close. He might pen a tale explaining that the way to catch a black hag is certainly not to drench a cat corpse in aniseed and drag it as one would pull a lure through the shallows to snag a fish. Killing cats only angers hags.

Perhaps she would pay the pastor a visit tonight and make sure he got it right.

Then she would move on again, back to the Highlands, where they called her Cailleach Bhuer.

THE AMPHORA

Steven Mohan, Jr.

Steven Mohan, Jr. is a former naval officer and writer whose work has appeared in many places, among them *Writers of the Future, Weird Tales, Polyphony, Paradox, On Spec, BattleCorps,* and *Aboriginal Science Fiction.*

It all began with the ambition of a single man, but then again, doesn't it always? A man's ambition has remade the world.

A man's ambition is the reason I am here.

Apollo's chariot has just settled below the far, blue edge of the Aegean, pulling a dark drape over the sky as he gives way to the huntress. A light breeze carrying the sea's chill combs through my hair, and I snuggle against my husband, but I'm not really cold.

Because of the fire.

It dances yellow-orange against the purpling sky, kicking up molten sparks of light and filling the air with the bitter taste of ash. The crackle and stutter of burning driftwood wrestles with the dull roar of waves falling over each other.

Epimetheus braces himself against the sand and leans over to retrieve a piece of fish from the basket at his side, the small one I wove for him out of river reeds.

He spears the soft, white flesh with a sharpened stick and thrusts it into the fire. After a moment he pulls it back and offers it to me with a tilt of his head and that small, shy smile that melts my heart.

I take the fish, moving it from hand to hand until it's cool enough for a quick bite. The taste of the bass, lightly singed, explodes on my tongue. A thin line of juice runs down my chin.

It is nothing more than a small fish, caught today by my husband's nets, but I think it is the finest thing I've ever tasted.

The fire is warmth and safety and love.

And then the breeze dies down, and somewhere in the distance, at the border between hearing and imagination, there is a sound. Something that might be a wail of agony, the cry of something being consumed.

Progress always has its price.

But that is not where my tale really begins. My tale, my *life*, begins on a stretch of white sand set against the shimmering blue of the sea lit by sunlight.

I am strolling along the beach, the wind catching at my white shift, pulling strands of honey-colored hair across my face. I reach up and comb the hair out of my face with my fingers.

And that's when I notice the man.

He’s a fisherman, that much I can tell from the small wooden boat pulled up onto the sand, the nets drying in the sun, the small knife gleaming in the sun as he guts and cleans his catch.

His back is to me as he leans over his task. He wears trousers fashioned from a sturdy brown fabric and no shirt. Powerful muscles work beneath skin bronzed by the sun’s touch. The effort of his work coats his body with a sheen of sweat.

My mouth tastes dry. “Hello?”

His head jerks around, and he rises quickly to his feet, the knife still hanging loosely in his hand. His face is as strong as his back: a thick brown beard that hugs the line of his strong jaw, nose bent like a hawk’s beak, intelligent brown eyes.

Eyes that narrow as they study me.

“Who are you?” he asks suspiciously.

I open my mouth to answer and stop because *I do not know.*

“Who are you?” he asks again, and this time there is a hardness in that voice.

“I don’t know.” My throat tightens painfully around the words. It is a terrible thing to lose yourself.

He studies my face for a moment and then he says, “I am Epimetheus.”

“Epimetheus,” I say, trying the taste of it on my tongue. Somehow it tastes *right.*

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers.

I laugh, a small self-conscious sound, and I start to shake my head when he says it again, colder this time, as if he were saying “You’re evil” instead of “You’re beautiful.”

He strides forward, and one strong hand closes painfully around my arm. He drags me roughly toward his boat. A silver-still pool of water rests in the boat’s bottom. *“Look,”* he snarls.

I glance down and see reflected in the pool a lovely, pale face, framed by long yellow hair and illuminated by pale green eyes. My free hand rises to my cheek. Is this really me?

“Tell me you are not beautiful,” he says angrily. “Tell me you are not *perfect*. Zeus sent you.” He brandishes the knife, still slick with fish blood. “Sent you to destroy me.”

“No,” I whisper.

“It’s not enough that he punishes my brother—”

“No.” I shake my head frantically.

“He has to punish all of us.” Rage twists his features.

“I will never betray you.” It comes out as a fierce whisper, and I don’t say it

for my life, I say it for *his*. It is one of those things you don't know is true until you say it.

And somehow, miraculously, he believes me. The knife hand slowly falls away and he lets go of my arm, leaving behind an ugly red mark in the shape of his hand.

"Who are you?" he asks again. "Did you . . ." He shakes his head. "Did you fall overboard? Wash ashore? Don't you have any idea?"

I glance down at the little pool of water, and I don't know if it's the sight of my face or the Gods whispering in my ear, but all at once a name comes to my lips.

"I am All-Giving," I say slowly. "I am Pandora."

Epimetheus leads me to his village, and on the way I see in a hundred different ways that he is a kind, gentle man. I see it in the way he shares his take with an old, toothless woman, the way he trades gentle jibes with his fellow fishermen, the way his deep, happy laughter rolls out of his body when a gaggle of children race past us.

But the red mark on my arm stubbornly refuses to be silenced.

After a little while I look at him and say softly, "Will you tell me something, Epimetheus?"

He meets my eyes and nods.

I moisten my lips and then I ask, "Why are you so angry?"

His face tightens and he says, “I will show you.”

He doesn’t show me, of course, but he does bring me close enough to the great rock to see the wretched black birds circling high overhead, to smell the iron tang of blood on the wind, and worst of all, to hear the desperate cries of his brother.

Prometheus.

It is a long walk back from the big rock, and he leads the way, maintaining a cold silence, and I wonder if he is angry with me.

Until I see a small shudder ripple across his back. I reach out and place a hand on his shoulder.

He turns to look at me, that strong face marked with tears. “I’m sorry,” he croaks.

“Why are you sorry?” I say softly. “He’s your brother.”

Epimetheus shakes his head. “Here you are, shipwrecked.” He swallows and wipes his eyes. “When you need help most, and I am lost in my own grief.”

I lightly touch his arm. “We can help each other.”

That night, Epimetheus takes me to his small hut, a tiny structure built of uneven mud bricks set around a wood frame and roofed with dried rushes. He

does not touch me, does not force me, though there is no one to stop him.

Epimetheus is poor. He doesn't have a bed. He has only a woven mat to soften the ground's hardness. He looks at me and smiles that shy smile. "Here," he says, handing me the mat, "for you."

The simple gesture touches me. I bob my head in thanks and lie down. His hut lies just off the beach, within easy reach of the sea and his boat, so I fall asleep listening to the soft rhythm of his breathing mixed with the deep rush of the ocean.

I'm standing in a clearing on a moonlit light surrounded by the gods. Hephaestus, the great Smith-God, is short and squat. (He's not *actually* short, not compared to us mortals, but he is a head shorter than the other gods and goddesses and he is shaped like a slab of granite.)

Like the rest of them he glows with a pale radiance, an inner light the color of pearl. His eyes burn orange with the fire of the earth, but his face is simple and kind. He steps forward and places a giant hand on my shoulder.

"Pandora," he intones in a great, deep voice that rolls over me like the pounding of the surf, "I give you the gift of voice."

Hephaestus steps back and his wife, Aphrodite, steps forward. Her beauty steals away my breath. "Pandora," she says, and her voice is as sweet as the voices of songbirds on a spring day, "I give you the gift of beauty and powers of seduction. You shall bend men to your will."

Aphrodite steps back, and a third god comes forward. I can tell that it is Hermes, the fleet messenger of Olympus, because he does not step forward so much as appear before me. He is a silver blur of motion and then he is *there.* "Pandora, I give you the gift of cunning and flattery." Then he steps back.

Watching it all is Zeus. He is the greatest of all of them. A fool could see it. He towers above his brothers and sisters, his hand running through his thick, black beard, hatred smoldering in his eyes.

I wake, screaming. Epimetheus comes to me in the dark, and holds me against the terror. I melt into his strong embrace, and then suddenly his mouth is on mine and his warm hands are working their way inside my shift, sending waves of pleasure rippling across my soft, smooth skin.

It is not long before things settle into a pattern. I walk the beach during the day while Epimetheus fishes. And when he returns, we share the gift of love.

One late morning, right before the midday meal, I stroll along the beach, the sea's foam washing the sand clean from my feet, and I spy something.

It is a kind of jar.

An amphora.

The waves have pushed the it up onto the margin between sea and shore, and one of the graceful handles that reaches to its lip is buried in the sand. It is fashioned from fired clay, and nothing ornaments its smooth, curved shape.

No doubt that it was dropped by one of the ships that ply the sea between Greece and the Ionian coast and carried here by the currents.

I reach for the exposed handle, and the sand releases its treasure with a gentle sucking sound. I pull the amphora up and see that it is stoppered with a bit of

cork.

I frown at this. Hm. I wonder if whatever's inside—wine, mare's milk, perfume—has survived its unexpected journey. The cork is soaked through, but still—

My fingers gently test the cork. The amphora is well stoppered, but as I apply pressure, I feel the slightest hint of movement.

Suddenly a black wave of nausea overtakes me, and I fall to my knees, gasping for breath. Maybe, I think. Maybe I will wait for my husband.

But even as I kneel there, struggling for air, my gaze cuts greedily toward the amphora's pleasing shape and the treasure that surely lies within.

"How could you have brought this back?" Epimetheus demands. His face is flushed with anger, and for the first time in weeks I remember how he'd hurt my arm on the day we first met.

"Whatever's inside may be unspoiled," I say. I hold the amphora up, and my eyes trace the jar's sinuous shape. "And even if not, the jar's well-crafted, isn't it?"

"It came from the sea," he hisses. "Think, Pandora. Do you imagine Poseidon has sent us a boon because he loves us?" Epimetheus shakes his head. "*No.* My brother is Prometheus and so I distrust the gods' gifts."

Like *you,* he does not say.

But I read it in his face.

“But I think—”

His hand slashes across his body. “I do not care what you think. Get rid of it. Return it to the sea. I will not have it in my house.”

Tears fill my eyes, but I nod and carry the amphora back to the sea.

Epimetheus is my husband, after all.

The next day Epimetheus and the man of the village go out to fish, but the fight with my husband has leached the joy from my heart, and I don’t take my morning walk.

Instead, I fall into a shallow, restless sleep.

I wake to the sound of angry thunder rolling across the sky, the rustle of our home’s roof as it’s buffeted by fierce winds. I push through the doorway and see that Zeus’ fury has colored the sky black.

Then a shard of lightning strikes, flooding the world with a startling blue-white incandescence that makes me jump, followed swiftly by a sharp crack that roots me to the ground. A tree to my left starts to burn, as if Zeus were saying: “You wanted fire? Here, *here* is fire.”

I run through the storm, the cold, hard rain pelting my skin and gluing my shift to my body. I run through the storm, calling the name of my beloved.

My Epimetheus.

Oblivion takes me sometime during the long, angry night. I awake to the greedy calls of gulls, arcing high overhead in the cloudless, blue sky, to trees battered and broken, to a beach littered with dead fish and crabs.

I push myself painfully to my knees, my body sore from the madness that had overtaken me the night before. I take a deep, shuddery breath and manage to rise.

I see a body, washed up by the sea, and my breath catches in my throat.

The man lies face down in the sand, his head turned away from me, the surf worrying his body, but still I recognize the curve of his shoulder, the shape of his head.

Epimetheus.

A sob escapes me and I run to him.

I bend down, touch his shoulder, feel the warmth of him and cry with relief: My husband lives.

And then I see that his arm is draped over something.

The amphora.

The amphora that only two days before I had thrown into the sea. My stomach

twists at the sight of it. I know right then that Zeus has not spared my husband out of pity. He has spared him so that he may suffer more.

I glance up. The storm has scattered the broken wooden corpses of several boats across the beach.

But there are no other men.

This is the price for disobeying a god. An entire village swept away by a terrible storm. In my heart I know that Zeus will never relent, not until all accounts are settled to his satisfaction. The King of Gods is many things, but above all else he is male.

And Epimetheus is the same way.

A man would not bow his head. A man would take the horrible beatings day after day simply to preserve his precious, foolish pride.

Men are like good amphorae: beautiful and useful, but brittle, too. So easy to break. It is women that swaddle them in softness. It is women that protect them from the hard realities of the world.

It is women who protect them from themselves.

I understand now that I am a weapon whom the gods have set against my beloved. Part of me wishes that Epimetheus had killed me on the day we first met. He was right to be suspicious of the gods' gifts.

I glance down at his sleeping form. I said I never would betray you, and I have not, though it saddens me that you will never understand that. I lean over and

smooth a strand of hair from his forehead and gently brush his lips with mine.

Then I reach for the amphora, and my hand steals silently toward the cork.

DUST

Michael Hiebert

Michael Hiebert is an award-winning author living in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. He's currently chiseling out novel number seven, and his short work has been published in the United States, Canada, and Europe. A self-described geek, Michael dedicates ten hours each day to writing. He has two children, ten computers, and a robot dog named Darwin.

A soft spattering of notes; piano strings plucked with the hammers held back. A frozen breath. A crystal cloud. And, appearing in the center, Juniper Brandywine.

Her pink teardrop slippers sink into the thick hand-knitted comforter warming five-year-old Emily Spears, whose face is so close the wind from her lips flutters Junipers wings. No longer a nuisance, time has promoted Emily to Scourge, to Bane, Opponent, Nemesis . . .

And soon, Juniper thinks, *Assassin*. She shivers, equal parts fear and withdrawal.

Emily giggles. The vacuity between her lateral incisors grips Juniper's attention. *Nonstop service straight to Hell's Kitchen.* Emily's brother's boot unintentionally opened the milk-tooth passage seventeen days ago (Christopher Spears, age thirteen, fully vested last Christmas).

Emily drones. Garbled nonsense, to Juniper, anyway. Prosaic banality without

redemption. Just . . . gray.

Then Emily laughs. An empty laugh. But Juniper seizes the opportunity to make a hopeful appraisal.

Alas, her heart sinks. Random chance extracted Emily's central incisors early. Months to wait for her others.

With a sigh, Juniper unties a purple sack from her belt. Inside, no surprise; a day, maybe two, and Juniper dies.

She wretches and wobbles. Shaking, convulsing, she licks and dips her fingertip into the bag. It comes out sparkling.

Dust

Juniper snorts most and licks the rest. Remembering young, naïve days with her friends—her clique, her cabal, her camarilla. They were invincible, flying through the Hollow and laughing at Faders both secretly and openly.

Faders had no excuses, with such work aplenty and a market growing bullish faster than inflation in Emily's world. At least no excuses that mattered. Two bits, three bits, even ten-dollar checks Juniper would happily sign. Baby teeth brought a hundred times more, even unrefined. And turned into Pixie Dust? Triple that value again.

No excuses in this economy, Juniper thought. Well, at least she did back then.

Her blood saturates, and Juniper's legs stabilize, making her *feel* normal

again, but she's marked and constantly reminded she's not normal by her faded skin. Four fixes left, she estimates, and reties the bag to her waist.

She sings. Her voice, unlike her body, still perfect: blue bells and glass bottles; waves, wind and wooden chimes. Although much falls beyond human ears, and Emily cannot understand the tongue, the child's eyes grow heavy, until quiet snores blow back Juniper's wings.

Hopefully, Emily will sleep till daybreak; a wish Juniper knows is futile, for tomorrow, when Emily summons, Juniper will die.

She needs something she stopped believing in seventeen days ago, when she came to harvest Emily's central incisors one year ahead of schedule.

Easy work. Standard operation.
Take two teeth, leave four quarters.
Piece of cake.

Admittedly, Juniper had limited experience in multitooth transactions, and this doubled her standard currency load, but she wasn't worried. She had tenure. Years of service without a single problem on the books.

She appeared after midnight, easily procuring each tooth without even needing to enlist the help of her Pillow-Jack.

Quarters one and two slipped under the case, quietly and quickly. Three required more force, but it went. Oh, how she wishes she'd stopped at seventy-five cents. How different her life would be.

And longer, she adds.

But she didn’t stop.
And the fourth quarter
got jammed.

Juniper pushed. She prodded. She kicked and she cussed. And then, Emily Spears, aged five and three quarters, human child, woke up.

Juniper panicked. *What if she screams? What if she cries?* Juniper took stock, and a deep breath. With two central incisors securely tethered to her belt, and four quarters in place (more or less), and half a bag of Pixie Dust, there was no reason to panic. Yet she kept a hand in her pouch for a quick getaway, just in case.

But Juniper heard nothing from Emily. No screams, no cries. Only saw wonder and awe in the child’s eyes. And for once in her life, Juniper felt affection toward a human (an attraction she would later blame for impairing her judgment).

Touching the child’s warm cheek, she said, “You’re a cutey-pie,” and Emily smiled. Then, with a voice unmatched by a thousand-angel choir, Juniper sang to the girl:

Sleep a sweet sleep
Dream a sweet Dream
We’ll dance through the meadow
And hide in the trees
From the top of the staircase
To the dimples on your face
Treetop to root stem
One two three and back again
Your world to my world
My time to your time
A gift for small Emily
With love

From Juniper Brandywine

Of course, Emily understood none of the words. Juniper had expected the girl to fall back to sleep, but she hadn't. Instead, she giggled and babbled in monotone gray; ugly sounds, like the ones always coming from Emily's species, reminding Juniper of factories, pollution, and death; wrecking the moment—leaving Juniper feeling awkward, uncomfortable, and wanting to leave.

Filling her palm with Dust from her pouch, Juniper gave a wave before disappearing into an eddy of sparkling mist. At least, that was the plan. Only, she never got quite that far, because something happened. Something that, to Juniper's knowledge, hadn't happened for hundreds of years.

Something impossible.

The girl made more noise, lying there in bed. Only this time, Juniper understood the two words Emily said. Real words. Not perfect, not poetic, not wrapped the way Juniper's mother had intended in beautiful, melodic phrase. But words, very real. *Very* real, just the same.

And when Emily Spears, aged five and three quarters, said, "Juniper Brandywine," Juniper swallowed hard. She understood this time.

From the lips of a human (a child no less), came Juniper's real Faerie name. And instantly, the two were bound together, Juniper as slave and servant, to be summoned at the fancy of master Emily, human child, aged five and three quarters.

After that, whenever she woke, Emily called the name. And Juniper would come sing her to sleep—four times a night or more. Exhausted, Juniper found

her work beginning to suffer—she couldn't harvest fast enough to keep up with the Pixie Dust. She didn't eat. She didn't sleep. She became paranoid, never knowing when she'd be snatched from the Hollow and made to perform again.

The following week, Juniper noticed a change. First on her breasts and tummy, then her legs and arms. Soon she couldn't hide it when she went out in public. Other Faeries shunned her. Her friends taunted her. Her camarilla teased her, called her Fader.

And she was.

Tonight, finally, Emily's again asleep. Hoping it lasts till sunrise, Juniper sniffles and wipes a tear from her cheek. From her pouch she extracts just enough Dust to return home for one last day in the Hollow.

How shall she spend it? Alone? Walking through the gardens? Reading by the riverbank?

Her body quivers uncontrollably, coming down off the Dust, and she thinks, *The point is moot.* Tomorrow will be spent in cold sweats, wrapped in the fetal position, holding back vomit.

Threatening to steal even this, Emily opens her mouth and yawns, giving Juniper one last tease of perfect baby teeth before going back to sleep.

Oh, if only she would lose another before Juniper's time ends. But it would take a miracle, and Juniper no longer believes in them.

Of course, it's *possible,* in *theory*. Just, very unlikely. But, Christopher *could* boot her again. Emily *could* fall down the stairs. A baseball *could* slam into the

side of her head.

Oh, who is Juniper kidding with all this wishful thinking?

Releasing her handful of Pixie Dust envelops her in swirling stars, and Juniper takes her last voyage home, unsure of how she feels. Afraid. Sad. Angry.

But mainly, just empty.

Until—

Watching the image of Emily fade, Juniper gets
an
idea.

The next night, Emily calls much later than her usual time. So late, Juniper had given up hope of doing anything but dying.

She spent the day rationing Pixie Dust. Not that it mattered. There wasn't nearly enough to stop her shaking or vomiting. But Juniper worked through it, scheming, outfitting, mentally preparing, and talking herself back every time she second-guessed the whole crazy, harebrained plan she had built in her mind.

And it *was* crazy, going against everything she knew. Yet, there was no other way. Desperate times called for desperate measures. Survival of the fittest. Glass half full and all of that.

Juniper knew, though, that the truth wasn't nearly so romantic. The force guiding her actions had much more to do with needing another fix of Dust. Still,

the platitudes helped. Besides, in the end, did it matter why?

Ready by nine, Emily time, Juniper waited for the call.

And waited.

And waited.

Ten o’clock came, and she vomited.

And waited.

At midnight, she finished the Pixie Dust and vomited some more.

And at one, she finished it again, turning the bag inside out, licking the fabric to get every grain. Then, with blurry vision and blood-laced bile and no color left in her skin,

Juniper began
to wither.

Thirty minutes later, her Faerie name issues from Emily’s head, ripping Juniper out of the Hollow, shaking, sweating, dizzy, disoriented, and into Emily’s bed.

Her eyes thick with sleep, Emily watches the twinkling colors. She thinks of glass slippers, pumpkin coaches, and Fairy Godmothers. Her new dolly will appear from the fire and the chimes and sing her back to sleep.

Juniper Brandywine.

The best gift the Tooth Fairy ever gave anyone, Emily suspects. She has lots more teeth; she hopes for lots more magical fairy dolls.

In the cloud is a familiar silhouette: butterfly wings, velvet dress, golden belt of twine. Emily's most precious gift.

Juniper Brandywine.

Through a yawn, Emily smiles. She rubs her eyes and refocuses. Juniper seems different tonight—unhappy. Her skin is white. She smells funny. And she isn't glowing as if she normally does, making Emily squint to see what Juniper holds in her hands. It runs down between her feet. Too dark to make out details, Emily moves closer again.

Juniper strains to lift the thing up. It looks heavy, but she gets it over her head. Emily peers just inches away, squeezing her eyes practically closed, until finally she recognizes what Juniper holds.

A sledgehammer. Like the one Emily's dad used to drive in fence posts last summer.

None of Emily's other dolls ever came with this accessory. Wondering why Juniper has, she opens her mouth to query.

A blur. A crack. Just one swing to her head. And Juniper knocks every tooth out of Emily's mouth, showering them onto the bed.

Emily screams, her tender throat filling up with blood.

Juniper finds a place to hide when Emily's parents come. They seem confused. *What's wrong, Emily?* They ask, frantically glancing around the room. *You must have fallen out of bed. Or something.*

They rush her off to the hospital, and Juniper puts one of the teeth under Emily's pillow.

And waits.

And waits.

She vomits on Emily's sheets.

And waits.

Rainbow Icefrost, with two quarters, eventually shows up to harvest the tooth. Juniper surprises her, and negotiations ensue. Trading Rainbow a second tooth for a gram of Pixie Dust, Juniper fixes.

She steals the fifty cents Rainbow left under Emily's pillow before going back to the Hollow.

The doctor at the hospital seems confused and decides Emily's parents are right: *She must have fallen out of bed. Or something.*

Later, in Emily's room, Mom is slightly troubled when she can't find her daughter's missing teeth. *Don't worry*, she says, *The Tooth Fairy will come anyway.* And leaves her with a goodnight kiss.

It only makes Emily feel worse, staring at her ceiling, terrified that the Tooth Fairy *will* come and unleash another magic fairy doll. Only this time accessorized with a cheese grater. Or a blowtorch. Or a shotgun.

Or a chainsaw.

Emily gets little sleep that night or the next. The entire month, in fact, brings hardly any rest. Every single doll she owns gets tossed into the trash. She can't eat solid foods for almost a year and a half.

And every day after that, for the rest of her long life . . .

Not once,

Not one single time,

Does Emily ever utter the name

Of Juniper Brandywine.

For Valentine:
whose central incisors were accidentally removed
by her brother *three* years ahead of schedule.

THE LAST RIDE

Douglas Smith

Douglas Smith is a writer from Toronto whose stories have appeared in over sixty professional magazines and anthologies in twenty-three countries and nineteen languages, including *Interzone, The Third Alternative, Amazing Stories, Cicada," On Spec, Oceans of the Mind,* and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror,* as well as anthologies from Penguin/Roc, Meisha Merlin and others. Doug was a *John W. Campbell Award* finalist for best new writer and has twice won the Canadian *Aurora Award* for best speculative short fiction. Doug is a nine-time finalist for the Aurora and has had several honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. His web site is *www.smithwriter.com*.

On the night her life would change forever, OOdin's horn wakened Vaya from a peaceful sleep. The mournful wail, echoing with the screams of the dying, called the Valkyries to ride from Valhalla, as it had done through the ages whenever war raged in the world of mortals.

Vaya disentangled herself from the arms of her still-slumbering sisters where they lay in the communal bed of the Valkyrior. Throwing back the warm cover of furs, she stood up, naked and shivering in the chill of the sleeping hall. The central fire had died to embers hours ago, and the rough stone floor was like ice to her bare feet.

Vaya dressed quickly as the other Valkyries rose beside her. Moonbeams stabbing through high windows beneath the hall's vaulted ceiling provided the only illumination, but after so many ages, Vaya did not need light to prepare for a ride. She wrapped her short skirt around her waist and laced up her leather tunic and boots. After strapping on a golden chest plate, she added armored leggings and armlets. Finally, she donned her winged helmet. Then grabbing her

spear, she sprinted with her sisters to the stables.

The stable hands had already hitched her chariot to Sleipnir. The eight-legged horse was Odin's own mount, but Vaya was Odin's favorite daughter of all the Valkyrior, and she alone was allowed to use the huge black beast.

When all were assembled, Frela, their leader, gave a cry, and Vaya and her sisters rose into the air on their chariots as one. The Valkyries swept down from Valhalla like a golden cloud to the world of mortals, following the scent of blood and death and war as they had done for centuries, until they hovered unseen in the night sky above the battlefield.

Vaya surveyed the scene below. Several units of marines, supported by a small number of tanks, were advancing through a forest and into the outskirts of a bombed-out town. From her viewpoint, Vaya could see the defending army entrenched behind the remaining walls of the town and waiting in ambush. As the two forces came into contact and the exchange of fire began, Frela raised her spear, indicating that the selection of heroes was to begin.

"There!" cried one of Vaya's sisters, pointing her spear at a blood-covered marine leading his unit in a charge against a mortar position. The marine's left arm hung limp and useless, but he still fired his rifle as he ran. "I choose that one!" the Valkyrie cried.

"And I that one!" another Valkyrie shouted, indicating with her spear a small soldier with the opposing forces who had just overpowered two enemies in hand-to-hand combat.

Each time a Valkyrie aimed her spear, a soft beam of golden light shot from its tip, marking the selected hero with a glowing aura, visible only to the Valkyries. Beneath them, both armies fought on, oblivious to the immortals above.

In wars through the centuries, it had been as it was tonight. The Valkyries would select those warriors whose bravery, valor, and honor on the battlefield marked them as heroes. And when a hero fell, a Valkyrie would land unseen beside the soldier and carry his immortal spirit to live forever in Valhalla.

Vaya had witnessed thousands of such conflicts. But still she felt the old battle thrill growing in her that night, felt it in the pounding of her heart, felt it in the warmth spreading from her guts to her groin.

She joined in the selection. One soldier in particular caught her attention. He fought bravely, but more than that, unless forced, he only wounded or incapacitated his opponent, disarming them and moving on. Vaya admired mercy in a warrior as much as she did bravery. She urged Sleipnir lower to the battlefield, where she could get a closer look at this man.

She caught her breath when she saw him: He was as fair as the harvest god Frey, as strong as Thor the Thunderer, as brave as Tyr the One-Handed. Vaya, like all her sisters, had never known a love beyond the love of battle. But from that moment, the thrill of the fight fell before a new and stronger emotion that gripped her. Her heart beat even faster, and the warmth that had begun in her groin blazed to a fire.

Vaya the Valkyrie was in love.

Many of her sisters had now landed on the battlefield, claiming the spirits of the chosen heroes who had already been killed. Not this one, she whispered, praying to Tyr, the God of War. Do not take this one, she begged. Even as she prayed, she watched in horror as her beautiful soldier approached a crumbling corner of a bombed building. Behind that corner crouched three of the enemy forces, their rifles trained on the point where he would appear.

A Valkyrie was forbidden to interfere with the course of a battle or with the fate of a warrior. Only the gods themselves were permitted such power. But in that moment, Vaya did not care. Her beautiful soldier was going to die only seconds after she had fallen in love with him.

Screaming at Sleipnir, she swept her chariot low to the ground, leaping from it as her soldier turned the corner into the ambush. She materialized in front of the three enemy soldiers as they opened fire. Deflecting their bullets with her golden armor, Vaya shot a bolt of lightning from her spear. The three attackers fell, stunned and unconscious.

But not before a stray bullet struck her soldier. Clutching his chest, he cried out and slumped to the ground.

Vaya rushed to him, cradling him in her strong arms as she tore open his shirt. Blood spurted from his shattered chest.

A Valkyrie knew the wounds of war too well, and Vaya could tell that his was a mortal injury. She read his dog tag. His name was Edward. Her soldier, her Edward, would die unless she acted. In that moment, knowing that she would pay a price, Vaya decided. She touched the tip of her spear to his chest. Golden light flowed from it over the wound. She withdrew the spear. The wound was gone.

Edward opened his eyes and looked up at her, then at her clothing. “What . . . who are you?”

Vaya smiled down at him and stroked his hair. “My name is Vaya. And my story will seem a strange one—”

“Vaya!”

Her head snapped up. Frela, the leader of the Valkyries, hovered above in her chariot, staring open-mouthed at Vaya and Edward.

“Vaya,” she moaned. “What have you done?”

Odin All-Father sat on his throne of blood-red pine on a raised dais in the Great Hall of Valhalla. The glare from the torches blazing on every pillar in the hall paled beside the glare that Odin was directing at Vaya with his one good eye.

“Have you *thought* on what you are asking, what you would be giving up, Daughter?” he roared, thumping the floor with the shaft of his spear, Gungnir, the Deliverer of Lightnings.

Vaya stood trembling at the foot of the steps leading to the throne. She wanted to throw herself to the floor and beg forgiveness. But she was a Valkyrie. And she had known the consequences her decision would bring. And she knew also the love that still filled her heart. So she drew herself up tall and forced herself to meet Odin’s eyes. “I have, Father,” she answered.

“You would trade immortality here in Valhalla for life with a *mortal*?”

“Our *love* will be immortal. It will live forever.”

Odin snorted. He pushed his great body out of the throne and crossed the dais. Descending the steps, he placed a huge hand gently on her shoulder. “But *you*, Vaya, you will be mortal. *You* will die.”

“I will have children, Father. I will live on through the life I create.”

“Ha! That is not living, girl. That is not immortality.”

Vaya’s anger overcame her fear. “What do *we* know of life? We have never experienced it. We know only death here. The Valkyrior deal only with the ending of lives. We bring nothing into this world, only take from it.”

Odin drew himself up to his full height, and thunder rumbled inside the hall. “Careful, Daughter. You are my favorite, but my patience with you has a limit.”

She dropped her head, but her resolve remained. “I’ve had enough of war and death, Father. I wish for peace and life. And love.” She looked up at him again. “If you truly love me, you will grant me the life I desire.”

He glared at her with his one good eye, and though her fear made her want to drop to her knees before him, she did not falter under his gaze. Finally, his face softened, and he shook his head. “Bah! So be it. You’re a fool, Daughter. But I prefer your foolishness away from Valhalla before it infects your sisters.” Lifting Gungnir, he touched the point of the spear to her breast, aimed at her heart.

Then, without warning, he thrust the spear into her.

Vaya screamed and fell backward onto the cold stone floor of the hall. Her body spasmed, impaled at Odin’s feet as he stood staring down at her, his face unreadable. After what seemed an eternity of agony to Vaya, she heard him grunt and felt Gungnir wrenched from her.

Vaya gasped as the pain left with the spear. But something else left her also. Drenched in sweat, lying helpless on the stone floor, she watched as a cloud of luminescence rose from her chest, clinging like golden blood to Gungnir.

Her immortality. Her power as a Valkyrie.

Struggling to her feet, she touched a hand to her chest. It came away unbloodied. She could find no injury, yet she knew she had been wounded. Mortally wounded. She was dying, having only a mortal's lifetime left to her.

Odin raised his arm, and two huge black ravens flew to land on it. One was Hugin, whose name meant memory, and the other was Muninn, whose name meant thought. They were Odin's eyes and ears in the world of mortals, and his emissaries. Odin whispered to them, and the two ravens leaped from his arm and flew out one of the high windows in the hall.

Odin turned to Vaya. "I have sent them to fix the memories of your mortal lover. He will recall you as another soldier, not as a shield maiden of Valhalla."

He fell silent, staring sadly at her. Finally, he spoke. "Goodbye, Daughter. May you find happiness with your mortal love." He turned his back and said no more.

Fighting back her tears, Vaya ran from the great hall. Outside, a pale-faced Frela waited beside her chariot. She ran forward and grabbed Vaya's arms. "Sister," she whispered, staring at Vaya wide-eyed. "Your skin."

Vaya looked down at where Frela's hands gripped her arms. Where her sister's skin glowed with immortal golden light, Vaya's own flesh seemed dull, a pale pinkish white.

"Vaya," Frela wept. "You are lost to us. Why did you do this?" She hugged Vaya to her.

Vaya nearly broke down in her sister's arms, but then she remembered Edward, and her love for him flared in her heart again, filling the void of what Odin had ripped out of her. "I have bought life and freedom, sister. For me and for the man I love."

Frela released her and stepped back, tears streaking her cheeks. “Father says that I must—that I must take you from Valhalla.”

Vaya nodded, and the two stepped into the chariot.

Vaya didn’t look back.

Life. Life as a mortal.

To Vaya, as the years passed and she looked back, the memories of her chosen life seemed to return to her in colors, each scene washed over, painted in a particular hue.

Red. Their passion together, Edward’s lips soft but hungry on hers, his manhood in her, the roses he brought her, their hearts beating as one.

Black. The night sky, the dark room, Edward’s hair on the pillow as he slept beside her after their lovemaking. The darkness in her heart as she lay awake, thinking on the choice she had made. A darkness that would never leave her.

White. Her wedding dress glowing in the chapel. The confetti shower sparkling in the sun. The blossoms bright in the trees. The sheets cool on their wedding bed. The shutters on their little bungalow in the suburbs.

Green. The grass on which they made love on a summer day, the canopy of leaves overhead, the small shoot of a wild rose poking through the earth beside where they lay afterwards, new life growing there like the new life she felt that had just been conceived in her.

Pink. Her baby. That wrinkled bundle of humanity that was Daniel, her son, as she first held him in the hospital. His tiny fingers wrapped around her own. His lips on her nipple as he fed from her.

Black. The darkness still with her, growing now as she had something else to fear for: the life of her son as well as Edward's.

Red. The blood running from Daniel's nose. The flush on his cheeks as he faced his first bully. The blood on the bully's shirt.

Red. More fights. More blood.

Black. That darkness in her. Her fear forever with her.

They lived in a tough neighborhood, and Daniel was no coward. At least once a week, he would be in a fight, never starting it, usually not even involved at the outset, but always intervening to defend a weaker friend or even a stranger. The street toughs learned quickly not to tangle with him. Though she was mortal now, Vaya had passed on some of her Valkyrie strength to her son. And, she feared, her love of battle.

Red. More fights. More blood. Her son's blood too often.

Black. Her fear. Always her fear.

Red. Black. Red. Black. Blood and fear.

Vaya had seen enough blood, had seen too many mortals bleeding the last of theirs onto a battlefield. She feared for her son every day. Her own mortality she

had grown to accept, but she found the mortality of her own child unbearable.

Unbearable, yet she bore it, as all parents do. And soon she came to accept that Daniel was his father's son and, like Edward, he had to be what he was—a hero, perhaps not on a battlefield of war, but on the battlefield of life. Considering his parents, how could he have been anything else?

Vaya learned to trust in Daniel's strength, his judgment, his goodness. The darkness in her heart grew smaller. But it never completely left her. The darkness knew what happened to heroes.

Daniel graduated from high school and went away to university, and she had to learn to live without seeing him each day. Then, one afternoon as Vaya, once Valkyrie, stood at the sink scraping dishes, she heard him call "Mom" from the front hall. She ran from the kitchen to greet him, thrilled at this surprise visit. She froze in the hallway where he stood.

He wore a uniform.

Afterward, Vaya couldn't remember what she had said to Daniel, screamed at him, cried to him before he left to be shipped out. It was as if she had said nothing for all the effect it had made. His country was at war, and Daniel wanted to help, as he had always wanted to help in a fight, to step forward and not back away.

Edward couldn't convince him either, though she could tell that her husband felt a pride in Daniel's decision she didn't share.

No Valkyrie will protect our son as I protected you, Edward, she thought.

On the night that Daniel shipped out, and for the first time since she had left, Vaya dreamed of Valhalla.

In her dream, she rode with the Valkyrior once more, the night wind cold in her face, her body young and strong again in her armor, and the reins of Sleipnir gripped sure in her hands. Her heart filled with the forgotten exhilaration of the ride, and she raised her voice in song with her sisters as they swept down onto a battlefield.

But the darkness in her rose to choke the song from her throat as she recognized the uniforms of the soldiers fighting below. And Vaya knew, as only a mother can know, that her son was here, somewhere beneath her in this theater of death.

Unbidden by her, a mist oozed from the tip of her spear and coalesced into a gray wraith shape. In her dream, Vaya called to the wraith, to her sisters, pleading for them to stop this scene from playing out. But her words rode away on the wind unheard as the wraith floated down to the battle.

Vaya held her breath as the omen of death searched from soldier to soldier, knowing in her heart the one the wraith sought. And when it found him, found Daniel as he led his men over a crumbled wall toward an unseen ambush, Vaya screamed.

And woke up.

She lay in bed, soaked in sweat and gasping in breaths, her heart pounding like a war drum in her chest. Edward lay asleep and oblivious beside her. The clock showed 3 A.M.

Closing her eyes, Vaya calmed herself, reaching out with her mind and her

heart. With the small part of her that remained Valkyrie, she knew that her son still lived. Daniel was alive. She could still feel him in this world.

The dream was an omen, a vision of what would be. She still had time to . . .

To do what? She was now just a mortal woman. What could she do to save her son? To save the life she had brought into this world, the one piece of immortality left to her, half of everything she loved.

Vaya rose from the bed, stripped off her soaked nightshirt, shivering more from the memory of the dream than from the chill of her sweaty nakedness. Throwing on jeans, a T-shirt and a sweater, she went quietly downstairs and into their small backyard.

It was fall, and the night air was crisp with the hint of an early winter. She cleared her mind and focused her thoughts. Raising her hands overhead and her face to the sky, she called out.

“Odin All-Father, hear your daughter’s cry. Send me your messengers, for Vaya of the Valkyrior must speak with you.”

She waited there for nearly an hour, her eyes on the sky, her ears tuned to every sound. She saw an owl pass overhead and once heard the distant wail of a train whistle. But nothing else. Then, just as she began to despair that her call had gone unheard or unheeded, the flutter of wings sounded behind her. Turning, she saw two shadows, darker than the night sky behind them, perched on the gutters of the roof.

She realized that she had been holding her breath and let it out slowly before bowing to the two ravens. “Hugin. Muninn. Thank you for answering my call.”

Hugin spoke. “What message have you for our master?”

“I wish to meet with my father.”

“Why?” Muninn asked.

“I wish to beseech him to grant me a boon.”

Muninn let out a sharp caw. “You are no longer Valkyrior, woman. Odin has no dealings with mortals.”

Vaya clenched her fists. Odin was her only hope. These creatures must take her message to him. “Listen to me, crow. I am Vaya, daughter of Odin All-Father, and still his favorite.” She prayed that her conceit was still true. “You will take my message to your master, or you will feel his wrath.”

The ravens both flapped their wings and cawed loudly, no doubt not used to being talked to in this manner by a mortal. But finally, they calmed themselves, and Muninn nodded his beak towards Vaya. “Very well, insolent one. We will tell him of your wish. It matters little. He will not meet with you.”

Then with an explosion of wings, both ravens leaped from the eaves and into the sky.

And as Vaya watched the dark shapes grow smaller and smaller, her hopes seemed to shrink with them, and the fear in her heart grew darker than the night.

But Odin did answer her plea for an audience and sent Frela the next night to fetch her to Valhalla. So while Edward slept in their suburban bungalow, Vaya, once Valkyrie, now mere mortal, stood again before her father where he sat on his blood-red throne in the Great Hall of Valhalla.

It was not going well.

“You let me save a mortal before. You let me save Edward,” she said, fighting to keep the anger—and the fear—from her voice as she faced Odin. “Why can’t I save my son?”

“You paid the price then, Daughter,” Odin answered. “You bought his life with your own immortality.” He rose with a sigh and walked to where she stood at the bottom of the steps leading to the throne dais. “A life must be bought with a life.” Odin stared down at her from under his bushy eyebrows. “What life will you trade for that of your son?”

Vaya swallowed. “Take another. Take someone else on the battlefield.”

Odin shook his head. “No, child. The life you offer must be a life that you own.”

Something cold squirmed in her gut and crawled up her spine. No, she wanted to scream. Not that.

Odin took her by the shoulders. “You own Daniel’s life because you created him. You own Edward’s life because you bought it for him.”

“No!” she cried, shaking herself free from him, stepping back. “Don’t make me choose between them.”

Odin shook his head. “I’m sorry, Daughter. The price must be paid.”

“Then let *me* be the price,” she cried, grabbing the front of his tunic. “I own *my* life, too. Take me. If you need a life, then take mine. I’m a mortal.”

Odin's expression softened, and his eyes began to glisten. "No, Daughter. That I will not do. I could not send you to Niflheim. I love you too much."

Vaya bit back a sob. "So you love me, do you, Father? As I love my son? As I love my husband?"

Odin shook his head. "I'm sorry, Daughter. The price must be paid."

Vaya stood sobbing. What more did she have to offer? What was the highest price she could think of paying, worth more to her even than her life?

Yes, she thought, I would do that, if it would save them.

"I have one more price I can pay," she whispered. She drew herself up as tall as she could. "I will come back to the Valkyrior. I will forsake my husband. I will forsake my son. If only you will save Daniel and not take Edward."

Odin eyed her narrowly. "Vaya, you will never again be able to contact them. You will be dead to them."

"I know, Father," she said, her voice breaking.

Odin stepped back and considered her. "To have my daughter return to me. To have you here again in Valhalla." He pulled her to his chest and stroked her hair gently. "Very well, child. I accept your offer—if you are willing to pay that price."

She stood there, letting him hold her, feeling nothing but the darkness that had lived inside her all these years blossom like a dark rose, finally choking out any hope for happiness.

“To save my son and my husband, Father,” she whispered, “I would pay any price.”

“I will send Hugin to the mortal world,” Odin said, “to adjust the memories that Edward holds of his wife, and Daniel of his mother, of what became of you. What should those memories be, child?”

“Let them remember the truth, father,” Vaya whispered. “Let them remember that I died of a broken heart.”

On quiet nights when the cries of war did not call them to ride, Vaya would rise silently from the bed of the Valkyrior and slip down to the stables. There she would saddle Sleipnir and ride the golden path down from Valhalla to the mortal realm.

Unseen, she would slip inside that small bungalow in the suburbs and sit silently on the side of the bed, watching her lover, her husband, sleep. She’d rise then and walk down the little hallway to where her creation, her son, slept, safely returned from the war. After a while, she would kiss them both and leave them sleeping and unknowing, and ride alone again back to Valhalla.

When she returned, her sisters would be awake and waiting for her. She would slip back into bed as they gathered around her, and she would tell them of her visit and of the two mortals that she loved.

They would sit quietly after her story, and Vaya would wait patiently for the question. Eventually, one of them would ask—tentative, timid, but they would always ask.

“Vaya,” they would say, “tell us again of this thing called ‘love’.”

And Vaya would smile and remember and tell them, dreaming of her two loves and of the day when the Valkyries would ride no more.

GREEK TO ME

Laura Resnick

Laura Resnick, a cum laude graduate of Georgetown University, won the 1993 John W. Campbell award for best new science fiction /fantasy writer. Since then she has never looked back, having written the best-selling novels *In Legend Born* and *In Fire Forged*, with more on the way. She has also written award-winning nonfiction, an account of her journey across Africa, entitled *A Blonde in Africa.* She has written several short travel pieces as well as numerous articles about the publishing business. She also writes a monthly opinion column for *Nink*, the news-letter of Novelists, Inc. You can find her on the web at *www.sff.net./people/laresnick*.

So, okay, Clarisse Mayhew—of, like, the New-port Beach Mayhews—had asked me to help plan the decorations for the Greek Week Ball. And I was totally honored, right? Because she was the two-time winner of the Outstanding Accessorizer Award for our chapter. Our chapter being Kappa Alpha Theta, of course. Which meant that winning that award was *way* more competitive than if she was, say, a Kappa Delta, or a Kappa Kappa Gamma, or—*eeuuuww!*—a Kappa Phi Lambda. Trust me, no Phi Lambda could accessorize well even if her life depended on it.

Although our rooms were next to each other in the sorority house, Clarisse and I weren't close. She was more, like, the best friend of Alicia Dalrymple—of the Westport Dalrymples—who was our chapter president. I knew from the day I joined the chapter that Alicia would wind up as president someday. She was, like, so totally Alpha Theta. Whereas Clarisse was more like a combo of Alpha Theta and Delta Zeta, with a dash of Chi Omega. Very brainy. But not in a bad way. She sat next to me in English 307 (History of the 21st Century American Novel), and it was amazing how many of the assignments she read. She even read the *Da Vinci Code*. I mean, like, the *whole* book.

So, anyhow, she and I were in the ballroom at Bailey Center one evening, figuring out a color scheme for the streamers and balloons.

“It needs to be really elegant,” Clarisse said, making a few notes in her new party-planner workbook. “Maybe mint green and a soft peach color. We don’t want to clash with the ambience.’

I totally agreed. That ballroom had the glamor of a bygone era. You could picture old-style stars sipping champagne there, people like David Du chovny and Madonna. It really made you think.

I was about to tell her how much I liked her ideas for the color scheme when the double doors burst open and a whole *herd* of Lambda Chi Alphas came stampeding into the room.

Hal Wagner, a strong contender for Greek Man of the Year that year, saw us. “Whoops! Sorry, ladies.” He said to me, “Hi, Ellie. I hope we’re not interrupting?”

“Hi, Hal! You know Clarisse Mayhew, don’t you? We’re planning decorations for the ball.” I waved to a few of the guys. I knew a lot of them because my boyfriend was a Lambda Chi. I dated Eric Sutton—of the Poughkeepsie Suttons. Eric was one of the most attractive guys on campus, and I knew that more than a few Greek girls envied me.

“Nice to see you again, Clarisse,” Hal said politely. “I’m director of this year’s annual Lambda Chi Alpha Greek Week pantomime. Would it be okay if we rehearsed in here?”

“Sure,” I said. “We won’t be long.”

“Actually,” Clarisse said, “we’ll be here for quite a while.”

“We will?” I said.

She nodded. “There’s so much left to do! We have to figure out table arrangements, think up a mural scheme for the far wall, come up with ideas for the ice sculpture . . . I mean, we could be here for *hours*.”

I’d always admired Clarisse, but I realized now that, in truth, I’d never really understood the kind of work and commitment that went into her two-time victory as Outstanding Accessorizer. I still had so much to learn.

“But if you need a place to rehearse,” Clarisse said graciously to Hal, “I think we can work around you.”

“Awesome!” Hal turned to his cast, “Gentle men, take your places!”

“Now,” Clarisse said to me, “we should talk about flower arrangements.”

“Hi, Ellie! What are you doing here?”

I turned to see Larry Planter approaching me. Larry was kind of short, pretty shy, and wore glasses. Very into math and computers. Made the honor list every semester and did volunteer work at a homeless shelter. He really wasn’t Lambda Chi material, my boyfriend Eric had told me. But his father and grandfather were members, so they couldn’t really keep him out. Especially considering how rich the Planters were—the whole *family* was into stuff like math and computers and overachieving.

“Hi, Larry!” He might be short and not really Lambda Chi material, but he was always nice to me, and there was no reason not to be nice back. Eric thought Larry had a crush on me, but I thought he just had good manners. “I’m helping

Clarisse plan decorations for the ball."

He frowned a little. "Really? But Eric told me that you and he had a hot date tonight."

"Oh, you must have misunderstood," I said. "We didn't have any plans tonight. He knew I'd be here."

"We're talking flower arrangements," Clarisse said to Larry, sounding a little clipped. "And I believe you're supposed to be rehearsing now?"

Larry ignored her and said to me, "No, I don't think I misunderstood. I bumped into Eric in the bathroom on our floor just an hour ago. He was wearing his Armani knock-offs—"

"He was?" I said, surprised. Eric only wore those for a special date. And for the past four months, that always meant a special date with *me*.

"That outfit's a *knock-off*?" Clarisse said, scandalized.

"—and said he was on his way to a hot date," Larry concluded.

"Whatever." Recovering her composure, Clarisse said, "Look, Larry, maybe an evening spent at the library is a Lambda Chi's idea of a 'hot date,' but Ellie and I have important work to do now, so if you don't mind—"

"He definitely wasn't going to the library," Larry replied.

"Where was he going?" I asked, feeling a little anxious.

Clarisse said, “Oh, wait. Isn’t Professor Schnitt having one of his soirees tonight?”

“Oh, I’ll bet that’s it!” I said, relieved.

I had taken a popular Schnitt class the previous semester, History 319 (Princess Diana: A Life Re-examined). It was a killer, but really interesting, especially if you’ve ever been bulimic or wanted to play polo. I almost got an A in the course, so now that Eric was in it, I’d been helping him with the writing assignments. Well, doing the writing assignments *for* him, really. And since I was already doing that anyhow, it wasn’t much more trouble to also do his writing assignments for his Cultural Studies class (Hollywood and the Kennedys), too.

Anyhow, once a semester, Schnitt always threw a little evening party, and any of his students who wanted extra credit had to show up, admire Schnitt’s collection of LPs (which, historically, were something people used to listen to back before CDs were invented), and pretend we didn’t notice how tipsy his wife was getting.

We were at a very tough college.

I added, “Schnitt’s soirees are semiformal, so Eric would have wanted to wear something special.”

“No, Schnitt’s soiree is next week,” Larry said. “Hal’s in his honors class—you know: Did Lee Harvey Oswald Act Alone?—and has been griping about having to attend Schnitt’s traditional biannual evening of torture next week. So that’s not where Eric is tonight.”

“Hey, Larry! We’re starting!” Hal called from across the ballroom, beckoning to his fraternity brother to take his place among the cast.

“You’re needed, Larry.” Clarisse gestured to the surroundings for which we were planning decorations, adding, “And *this* can’t wait any longer.”

“So if Eric wasn’t all decked out to take you to dinner, Ellie,” Larry persisted, “and he’s not at Prison Schnitt, then where was he going tonight?”

Clarisse said, “I don’t know, Larry, and I don’t care. Ellie and I have *important* things to think about now, so if you don’t mind—”

“And why,” Larry asked, “did he put condoms in his pocket before he left the frat house?”

“*What?*” I blurted.

Clarisse said to him, “*Now* see what you’ve done?”

“My God!” I clutched Clarisse’s hand, seeking support. “Eric’s *cheating* on me!”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Clarisse said soothingly. “Of course he’s not.”

“Are you naïve or just stupid?” Larry asked her. “The guy puts on his best stud duds, grabs a handful of condoms, and tells me he’s on his way to a hot date. Meanwhile, his girlfriend is spending her whole evening with *you*.”

Clarisse said. “Well, if he were cheating—”

“Oh, no!” I felt sick.

“—why would he tell *you*?”

“Um . . .”

“Yes?” she prodded.

“Well . . .”

“Go on,” Clarisse said coldly.

Larry turned red. “He was bragging to me that he was going to get a lot of hot sex tonight—”

“Oh, my God!” I thought I would throw up.

“—and making fun of me for, er, um . . .”

Clarisse snickered. “For *never* getting any hot sex, perhaps?”

“His comments were along those lines,” Larry said, scowling. “But in language far too graphic for me to repeat in front of Ellie.”

I gasped. “You thought he meant *me*. That’s why you were surprised to see me here!”

“Of course,” Larry said. “When he talked about how, um, desirable his date was, who could he have meant but you?”

“That’s just it,” I said miserably. “Who *did* he mean?”

“Oh.” Larry blinked. “*Oh.*”

Clarisse sighed. “I suppose you’ll want to go back to the sorority house now, Ellie.” She closed her party-planning workbook and put away her pen, as if she intended to go with me.

“No,” I said, “I want to find Eric.”

“What?” she blurted.

“I know all of Eric’s favorite places for a date. Especially when he hopes sex will be included. Larry,” I said, “you have a car. Will you help me find him?”

“Of course, Ellie.”

“No!” Clarisse cried.

Larry said to her, “Calm down. Surely you, of all people, can finish planning decorations without Ellie.”

“No, wait!”

“I’m sorry, Clarisse. I hate to let you down,” I said. “But I have to do this.”

“But, Ellie—”

“And I have to do it right *now*.”

“Larry, come on!” Hal called impatiently.

“Sorry, Hal, I’ve got to miss rehearsal!” Larry called back.

“What?” Hal cried. “But who’ll play Mary Magdalene?”

Larry told me, “We’re doing a satire on the *Da Vinci Code*.”

“Clarisse, maybe you could fill in for Larry tonight?” I said. “You read that book, didn’t you?”

“Ready, Ellie?” Larry asked me.

“No!” Clarisse cried.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s go find Eric.”

“No! *Stop!*”

We both looked at Clarisse.

Her mouth worked for a moment. Then she said awkwardly, “You can’t leave me alone with all this work, Ellie.”

“Oh, you never really needed my help, Clarisse. I’m flattered you asked me, but you’ve got it all under control.”

“No!” she cried again as we turned to go.

“Why are you getting so worked up about this?” Larry asked her, frowning.

“I—I—”

“Come to think of it,” he said slowly, “why did you ask Ellie to help you in the first place? Everyone knows you did the Alpha Theta rush decorations without help.”

“As well as the Pan-Hellenic Christmas party,” I added in a soothing voice, since Clarisse looked so anxious.

“Kind of an interesting coincidence,” Larry said, “that you’re keeping Ellie so *busy* on the same night that Eric’s having a hot date with someone else.”

I gasped in surprise, and my gaze flew to Clarisse’s face. Her guilty expression exposed the plan in an instant.

“Is *that* why you asked me to help you?” I said, crushed. “As a favor to Eric? To help him cheat on me?”

Larry said, “I don’t think Eric knows Clarisse well enough to ask her for a favor like that. But guess who’s in that Hollywood and the Kennedys class with me and Eric? A Kappa Alpha Theta who’s been exchanging whispers and notes with Eric in class. And who happens to be a friend of Clarisse’s!”

It hit me like a cold slap. “Ohmigod! Alicia Dalrymple! Not just a friend,” I said accusingly to Clarisse, “your *best* friend.”

“And *she* could certainly ask you to keep Eric’s girlfriend busy with something important while she’s out on a date with him, couldn’t she?” Larry took a few steps forward, causing Clarisse to back up a little. “So you helped one of your sorority sisters betray another member!”

“Well, Alicia *is* the chapter president,” Clarisse pointed out.

“Clarisse!” I was shocked and wounded. “How *could* you? How could *Eric*?”

“What do you expect, given the way you accessorize?” Clarisse yanked at my neck scarf and threw it on the floor. “For God’s sake, would you get *rid* of this thing? I’ve had to suffer looking at it all evening! And it is *so* last year!”

* * *

It didn’t take long to find Eric and Alicia. There were only three restaurants in this town nice enough for Eric to bother putting on his Armani outfit, and only one of those was near a pasture where you could park a car and count on not being disturbed for a while.

Larry questioned the hostess at the restaurant and, sure enough, a couple fitting the right description had left only ten minutes before we got there. Larry was being wonderful, handling everything. In fact, he’d also handled Clarisse, forcibly taking away her cell phone (over Hal’s horrified cries of protest when he saw us attacking her) so that she couldn’t warn Alicia. Then, just to be sure that Clarisse would be occupied, Larry told Hal that Clarisse had volunteered to replace him in the pantomime. We figured she was *still* trying to escape the clutches of enthusiastic Lambda Chi performers by the time we found Eric, his pants down around his knees, on top of Alicia Dalrymple in the backseat of his car.

I flung open the car door and shouted, “How *could* you?”

Alicia screamed and started trying to struggle back into her clothes. Larry seized Eric by the hair and pulled him out of the car. Eric stumbled around, trying to pull up his pants. I took a half-empty bottle of cherry soda that had been in Larry’s car and poured it all over Alicia. Her pale silk dress would never recover from *that*. Then I threw the bottle at Eric while Alicia’s screams rose to an ear-splitting pitch.

Eric said, “*Ellie*? What are you *doing* here?”

“Looking for you!” I snapped. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Uh . . .” As he finished buckling his belt, he said, “Alicia and I were just, um, studying for an exam in Hollywood and the Kennedys, and—”

“She was channeling Marilyn, you were channeling Jack?” Larry guessed.

“She was worried about her grades!” Eric glared at Larry. “I was trying to comfort her!”

“It’s funny how much it looked like fornication,” Larry said. “Just goes to show how deceiving appearances can be, I guess.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Eric demanded of him.

“I gave Ellie a lift after Clarisse Mayhew confessed that she was keeping Ellie busy as a favor to Alicia,” Larry said, “so that you’d have the evening free to cheat on your girlfriend!”

Alicia gasped. Eric muttered a bunch of ugly words under his breath.

I said, “How could you *do* this to me, Eric?”

He shrugged. “Well, to be honest, Ellie, I just don’t think you’re right for me. I don’t think you really understand my needs.”

“Then why didn’t you say so?” I demanded. “Why sneak around behind my back?”

He put his hand tenderly on my cheek. “I just didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

I bit his hand. As hard as I could. Eric howled and snatched it away. It was bleeding. That made me feel a little better.

“My God!” Alicia cried. “Are you insane?” She scrambled out of the car to examine Eric’s hand. “Is it bad, sweetheart?”

“Sweetheart?” I repeated. “So this isn’t a first date?”

Alicia glared at me. “I do *not* get in the backseat on a first date!”

“You’ve been sneaking around on me for *weeks*, then?” I shouted at Eric.

“I was going to tell you,” he said. “When the time was right.”

“When would that be?” I cried. “After I’d finished writing the last of your papers for the semester?”

Nursing his hand, Eric said, “Hey, you’re still going to keep doing that, aren’t you?”

“What?”

Alicia added, “You’ve got to! Surely you can see that?”

“Are you, like, totally nuts?” I said.

Eric said, “If the prose style of my papers changes suddenly, that’s going to

look suspicious. You've got to keep writing my papers for me!"

"I'd rather die!"

"But would you rather be *expelled*?" Alicia said.

"What?" Larry snapped.

"If Eric gets caught," she said, "then we'll expose Ellie. She'll be in just as much trouble as he is."

Eric nodded. "That's right. Look up the honor code if you don't believe us."

"*You* are quoting the honor code to *me*?" I said incredulously.

"*And* you'll be kicked out of Kappa Alpha Theta. I can make it happen like *that*." Alicia snapped her fingers. "I am the chapter president, after all."

"You'd *do* that?" I asked, horrified.

Alicia smiled nastily. "Our next Hollywood and the Kennedys paper is due a week from Monday."

Eric smirked at me. "Make sure it's good, Ellie."

When I burst into tears, Larry punched Eric.

* * *

I was too hurt and outraged to thank Larry for all his help the way I should

have. After he drove me home from the humiliating scene in that pasture, I just slid out of his car and staggered toward the Kappa Alpha Theta house, trying to stop crying.

Then I realized I couldn't possibly go inside that house! Alicia and Clarisse lived there, too! They were the most popular, powerful girls in our sorority. If I didn't suffer this outrage in silent humiliation—*and* keep writing Eric's papers for him—they'd turn the whole house against me. The whole chapter!

I turned away from the house, eager to disappear into the dark. I walked the streets of campus, anguished and alone. After a while, I realized I was approaching Winston Hall. My footsteps had taken me here unconsciously. Behind Winston was the place I always sought when I was facing a difficult decision, like whether to wear a ball gown a second time or just take it to a consignment shop.

I walked around the back of Winston and through the trees. There, at the very edge of the landscaped yard, was the Delta Sigma Theta stone. It was all that was left of the very first sorority house ever built on this campus; the original Delta house had been destroyed by fire way back in the 1980s. The Deltas had relocated to the other side of campus and built a new house. The remains of this one had been bulldozed away and buried under the soil. All that was left was this one stone from the original foundation. I thought of this as a Pan-Hellenic holy place, where all Greeks could come when their souls were troubled.

I knelt in the grass—which was a mistake. It *ruined* the knees of my linen slacks. And I touched the sacred Delta stone as tears streamed down my face.

"What am I going to do? Oh, *what*?" All the weight of my despair crushed down upon me. "Oh, help me. Help me! Someone, please, *help* me!"

There was an explosion of fire and smoke and swirling color.

I gasped and keeled over sideways. While I was scrambling backwards on my bottom through the grass (those slacks would never be the same again), a shape formed out of the fire and smoke and swirling, psychedelic fog. I stopped scrambling and just sat there staring, open-mouthed, when a beautiful, dark-haired woman slowly emerged from the chaos of mysterious color and light.

She wore a filmy gown that left her shoulders bare, and really nice sandals. Her eye make-up was way too heavy and she needed more lipstick, but basically she had a put-together look—just a weird one. There were . . . Well, I'll just say it. There were *wings* on her back.

She looked down at me, raised one black brow, and said, "Come on, get up. That grass will *ruin* those slacks."

I accepted the hand she offered me. "Thanks. Er, um, I'm—"

"Eleanor Kanasky—of the Milwaukee Kanaskys. Yes, I know."

"You do?"

"Of course. After all, you summoned me. So I know everything. Well, everything about *you*, that is."

"I *summoned* you?"

She jerked her thumb at the Delta stone, where I'd been kneeling a moment ago. "That whole 'help me, help me' prayer. That was you, right?"

"Um . . . yes." I blinked. "I guess I *was* praying."

"You guess?" she repeated. "Honey, you do know that this is a sacred stone,

right? The only remaining stone from the foundation of the original Delta Sigma Theta house?"

"Yes."

"Good." She nodded. "And when worthy Greek maidens come here to pray for help, they get it. *Especially* if they want help getting even with men who've wronged them or sisters who've betrayed them!"

"I want help with *both*!" I said eagerly.

"Yeah, that's why I came so fast in answer to your supplication. This job's going to look great on my eternal record."

"So you know? About my boyfriend betraying me with the president of my chapter?"

"And don't forget the sister who *helped* them betray you. She won't get off lightly, either."

"That's wonderful!" I paused. "But . . . but who *are* you?"

"My name is Aello."

I glanced at her wings. "Are you an angel?"

"Good gods, no! I'm a Harpy."

"A what-y?"

“A Harpy.” When I didn’t respond, she said, “You know. One of the three Harpies? My sisters are Ocypete and Celaeno.”

“Sorority sisters?”

“No, real sisters.

“Okay, but, if you’re not an angel . . . I mean, you’re not, like, a *demon*, are you?”

“No! Well . . . okay, maybe. But definitely not in the narrow-minded Judeo-Christian way that you mean.”

“No?”

She looked annoyed. “You’ve never heard of a Harpy?” When I shook my head, she said, “Don’t they teach the classics here?”

“Sure. I took a course freshman year where I had to read the Cliff notes of a Shakespeare play.”

“Great Zeus! How barbaric this century is!” Aëllo shook her head. “I suppose you don’t know what the Furies are, either?”

“Oh, I know what fury is,” I told her. “I felt quite a bit of it just a little while ago.”

“Not fury. The Furies.” She sighed. “I suppose you don’t know what a Siren is, either?”

“A whirly thing on top of an ambulance that makes a lot of noise?”

“No.”

“But—”

“And you call yourself a Greek,” she said in disgust. “This place is a cultural wasteland.”

“So you’re not from around here?”

“I’m originally from Crete.”

“Wow! You’re really far from home!” Crete is, like, in France or something. “What brought you to America?”

“Work.” She gestured to me. “It’s a family business, just me and my sisters. Things have gotten really busy ever since so many Greeks started popping up in the New World. Seems like I travel all of the damn time now.”

“Well, I really appreciate your coming here to help me.” I paused and asked, “Er, how *are* you going to help me?”

“Ah. Of course. You don’t know what Harpies do,” she said morosely.

“What do you do?”

“Well, our specialty is snatching souls of the dead—”

“What?”

“—but unless you want your three nemeses bumped off—”

“That seems a little extreme.” I was angry and hurt, but I wasn’t homicidal.

“—that won’t work. So we’ll have to snatch something else. That’s what Harpies do. We snatch stuff. We used to snatch people, but these days, that gets our supplicants in all kinds of trouble with the cops.”

“I see.”

“So what can I carry off that your loathsome ex-boyfriend, his sleazy date, and her bitchy friend would *most* hate to part with?”

“You can take away anything?”

“Yes. Anything at all, whether it’s tangible or not.”

“How is that possible?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s very technical and certainly beyond your limited mortal capacity to understand.”

“Huh?”

“It’s magic.”

“Oh. Okay. In that case . . .” Yes, I thought I knew exactly what things my two Greek sisters and my former Greek boyfriend would *most* hate to have taken away from them.

“Nooooooooooo!”

Alicia Dalrymple’s screech echoed through the Alpha Theta house a few days later. I peeked out the door of my room in time to see her come running up the stairs. She was red-faced, sniveling, and held a letter in her hands. She went to the door of the room next to mine and opened it without even bothering to knock, too absorbed in her own misery to use good manners.

Then she shrieked and staggered back a few steps. “What are you *wearing*?” she cried.

From inside in room next to mine, Clarisse’s voice was loud and ragged. “You don’t like it? It doesn’t work?”

“It’s the most hideous ensemble I’ve ever seen! What could you possibly be *thinking*?”

Clarisse gave a wail of anguish. “I don’t know what’s wrong! I’ve been trying to get dressed for the past *seven hours*! It’s as if I’ve completely lost my fashion sense!”

“No, don’t put *that* on! That’ll just make it worse!” Alicia hovered in the doorway, as if afraid to enter the room of a person as badly dressed as Clarisse evidently was.

“My God! What’s wrong with me?” Clarisse cried. “I can’t—can’t—can’t *accessorize* anymore!” Something made a loud thudding noise. I guessed she’d thrown her shoe at the wall. “How can I leave the house dressed like this? You’ve got to *help* me!”

“I can’t!” Alicia wept. “I’ve got to move out of the house! Today!”

“What are you talking about?”

“This very minute!”

“Huh?”

Alicia waved the letter in her hand. “This is from the national office! I’ve been . . . impeached as president of our chapter.”

“What?”

“And I’ve been kicked out of Kappa Alpha Theta! In disgrace! Forever! With no opportunity for an appeal!”

“No! Why?”

Alicia wiped at her wet, puffy face and read directly from the letter. “For ’conduct unbecoming to a member of this sorority’.”

“What did you do?”

“What does it matter? They demand I vacate the premises! Immediately!” She sank to her knees, sobbing her heart out in Clarisse’s doorway. “Oh, my God! I’m not an Alpha Theta anymore! What am I going to do? I’m *nothing*! I’m not chapter president anymore! I’m *no one*!”

From inside her room, I heard Clarisse say, “Damn it! This sweater doesn’t go with this shirt at *all*, does it?”

I was Larry’s date to the Greek Week ball. Decorations were last-minute and a

little sparse that year, since Clarisse Mayhew had disappeared from campus (permanently, it seemed) leaving the job undone, and most of her party-planner workbook notes were so ill-considered that the committee wound up burning them. What people mostly remembered about Clarisse, it seemed, was how badly she'd been dressed the last time they'd seen her. And Alicia Dalrymple dropped out of college only a week after being kicked out of the sorority, having found the humiliation too much to bear. A month later, she was apprehended for shoplifting at Neiman Marcus and got sentenced to community service.

Eric Sutton remained enrolled in school and a member of Lambda Chi, but he didn't attend the Greek Week ball, since he was unable to get a date after Alicia left town. He had suddenly put on quite a lot of weight, developed a dreadful problem with his complexion, came down with a bad case of halitosis, and became known for a strange body odor problem. I had asked Aïllo to take away the thing Eric valued most, too—his ability to attract Greek girls. As far as I know, the night Eric cheated on me with Alicia was the last time he ever had a date.

As expected, Hal Wagner won Greek Man of the Year. It was announced at the Greek Week ball. But the Greek Woman of the Year was a big surprise, at least to me—*I* won it!

"Happy?" Aïllo asked as I stood on the stage next to Hal, accepting the applause of the gathered sorority girls and fraternity boys.

"Hey, where'd you come from?" I asked.

"Just popping in to sign off on this job. You're satisfied with my work?"

"Oh, everything turned out wonderfully!" I said. "I can't thank you enough!"

"No need to thank me, Ellie," Hal said, standing next to me. "You earned this

honor on your own."

"Er, I was talking to—"

"Forget it, he can't see me." Gesturing to the crowd, Aëllo added, "None of them can. Only you, the supplicant."

"Well, it looks like your work is done here," I said.

"For now. But the next time a worthy Greek maiden touches the sacred stone of the old Delta Sigma house and prays for help, I shall return! Meanwhile, take my advice and marry your date."

"Larry?"

"I'm no Oracle, of course, just a Harpy. But a nice Greek boy like that? I think he'll make a wonderful husband."

Larry and I got engaged that night. And, as time proved, Aëllo was right.